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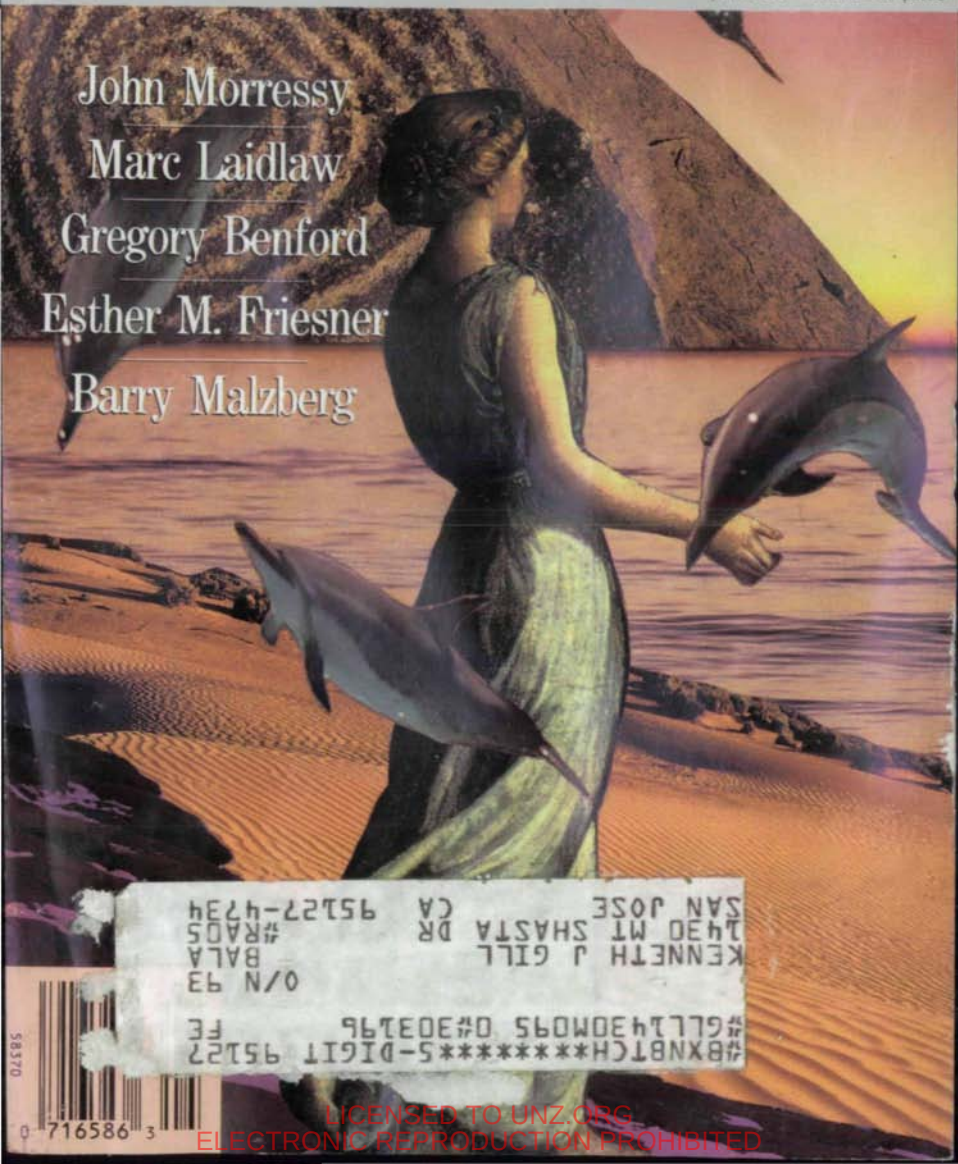

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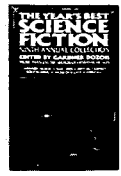

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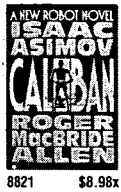

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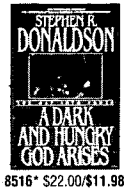

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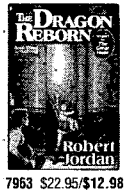

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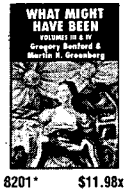

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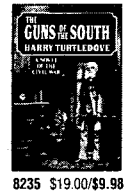

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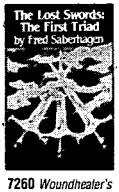

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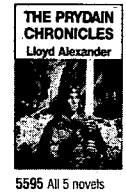

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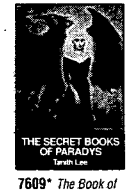

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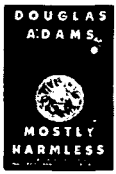

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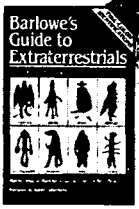

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Editorial

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

I AM A lousy interview subject.

Ten years ago, when I was a working journalist, I trained aspiring journalists in the art of giving the interview. Often I would become the world's most difficult interviewee to show the students what they might be up against.

I never thought some of them would face me for real.

Actually, I give a good interview when faced with someone competent on the other side of the desk. I have no patience at all for the interviewer who already has the answers mapped out to the questions he plans to ask.

I encountered just such an interviewer last week. A man called from a local radio station, wanting to spotlight F&SF on his program. After his first few questions ("Do you publish fiction?"), I realized I was in the hands of a man who did not know his subject. As I usually do in those cases, I offered to send him a copy of the magazine and some background material, but he was under deadline and determined to ask his questions then and there.

His questions focused on his perception that movies and television have taken readers away from the fantasy and science fiction genre. No, no, I assured him. Movies and television have brought readers to the genre. He didn't believe me. Soon the interview degenerated into a case I always warned my students against: the interviewer trying to convince his subject that the subject's opinions were wrong.

But they aren't. The numbers back me up. Since the mid-sixties, the number of fans who attend science fiction conventions and Worldcons in general has grown dramatically. Granted, many of these people are "media" fans who pay more attention to film than the printed words, but many are not. Our readership has also increased in those years. A number of those readers have come into the genre by reading novelizations of movies, television tie-in novels, and series books. Once they have read through those categories, they move on to the books shelved nearby — the "real" sf.

Unlike many of my colleagues, I believe that tie-in books serve a purpose. Tie-ins serve as an introduction to reading for many media fans, and good tie-ins often open the door to books based on original materials. Ashley McConnell's *Quantum Leap* novel reads like a strong episode of

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the series. Barbara Hambly's *Star Trek* novel is one of the best, as is Joe Haldeman's. Good bookstore clerks will lead readers to other books written by these excellent authors.

The only time a tie-in or novelization hurts the reading process, in my opinion, is when it corrupts the original source material. I got furious when I saw the novelization of Francis Ford Coppola's movie, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. The novelization is newly written, based on the screenplay by James V. Hart, which was based on Bram Stoker's novel. Why not reissue the original with a publicity shot from the movie on the cover? Bram Stoker did use 19th century fiction techniques, but most readers can overcome the wordiness quickly enough when the story is good. And Stoker's story is excellent, which is one reason the novel has survived the test of time.

Often I use television to lead recalcitrant readers into sf. Most of my friends who read only the books found in the literature section of their university bookstore watch *Northern Exposure* on CBS. *Northern Exposure* has a wonderful sense of whimsical fantasy, with everything from ghosts to psychic powers to the idea that magic could be real. When these friends talk about the series, I point them to sf authors like Connie Willis, Karen Joy Fowler, Alan Brennert and Bradley Denton, all of whom have works with that whimsical but intellectual feel. The doorways into the genre exist, if we only know how to use them.

When the interviewer and I finally finished our verbal tussle, I asked him why he believed that television took people away from the genre. "I watched *Twilight Zone* and *Outer Limits*," he said, "and I've never picked up an sf book in my life."

"You still read fiction, don't you?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied.

"And those programs didn't make you read less, did they?"

"No," he said, somewhat quietly.

I let the pause grow for a moment, then said, "You were lucky in what you watched, you know. *Twilight Zone* and *Outer Limits* featured some of the best writers in our genre, many of whom went on to literary acclaim and to win fiction awards."

"Really?" he asked, perking up. "Could you tell me their names? Maybe I'll go look up their books. I miss the shows and I don't get cable."

"Sure," I said, and smiling, I ran down the list.

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John Morressy has written a number of novels and countless short stories. He last appeared in F&SF in our January, 1991 issue. People often complain about companies moving out of the country to control labor costs by hiring inexpensive workers. In "Working Stiffs," John takes the idea to horrific extremes. ...

Working Stiffs

By John Morressy

THE AIR CONDITIONER circulated the odor of stale cigar smoke through the humid office. Harry leaned back in his squeaky chair, closed his eyes, and tried not to think of bankruptcy.

He heard familiar footsteps. My nephew the college graduate, he thought. The smart one in the family. If he's so smart, why is he here with me, being ruined?

Jerome entered and crashed down in his chair. "Hot out there." "Hot in here," Harry replied.

"Did anybody call while I was out?"

Harry gave a short bitter laugh. "I must have been crazy to move the business here. I'm too old for such aggravation. And such heat." He wiped his brow, sighed, and said, "Why did I leave New York?"

The question was a *cri de coeur* rather than an inquiry, but Jerome replied nonetheless. "The taxes were killing you."

"I learned how to beat the taxes: you stop making money."

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"Do you know what this kind of space would cost in New York?"

"In New York, it wouldn't be a sauna."

"Turn up the air-conditioning," Jerome said.

"It's turned. I still feel like the Turkish baths."

"In a few weeks we'll be doing fine. We'll get new air conditioners. You'll need a coat to come to the shop."

"How will we do fine when we can't get people?"

"You had trouble finding good workers in New York, didn't you?"

"Here I can't even find bad ones. The Chamber of Commerce swore that the state was full of people dying to work. They're dying to work at the bottling plant, maybe, or the chicken farms, but they're not dying to work for me." The two men were silent for a time, and then Harry sighed and concluded, "Who could work in this heat, anyway? It's a jungle. Things grow on the machinery."

"Once we're operating, everything will be fine."

"'Everything will be fine.' This is what they taught you in college?"

"I'm a highly trained personnel manager, Uncle Harry. I'll get us the people we need. Trust me."

Harry swiveled his chair around and stared down at his empty desk. New machinery and nobody to work it. Huge loans and no orders coming in. A plant the size of an aircraft carrier and nothing alive in it but bugs and fungus. His brooding was jarred by a sudden blur of motion as an insect darted across his desk. Harry made no aggressive move. What's the use? he thought. You squash one, a dozen come out as pallbearers.

He rose with a great sad sigh and made his way to the bathroom, hoping that a splash of water on his face and neck might cool him off for a few minutes. He returned at a brisk walk, a haunted look in his eyes.

"A jungle outside is bad enough, now it's a jungle in the toilet!" he said, shaken. "There's a spider so big it could carry you off. It belongs in the movies."

Jerome was suddenly animated. "Like *The Thief of Bagdad!* The one inside the statue. He guarded the All-seeing Eye. He had a crown on his head, remember?"

"Whatever," Harry muttered. He wanted sympathy, not movie trivia.

"Sabu got him, though. He tricked him by sliding down the web, then he stopped short and *shhhk!*" Jerome cried, slashing with an imaginary scimitar.

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"I should hire Sabu and send him into the toilet."

"Sabu is dead, Uncle Harry."

"It figures. I need somebody, he's dead. If I could get in touch, I'd still hire Sabu. Nobody else could handle that spider."

"You can't hire the dead," Jerome said.

"I can't hire the living, either. Who's left?"

Jerome did not reply. For the rest of the afternoon he seemed preoccupied. He was not by nature contemplative, but he showed all the signs of a man engrossed in thought.

Next morning he did not show up. At three o'clock, when Harry was half-convinced that his nephew had abandoned him, the door burst open and Jerome bounced through the doorway, arms extended in a theatrical gesture.

"Ta-daa!" he blared. "Our worries are over! We have workers!"

Harry studied his nephew's beaming face and immediately had doubts. This was too good. What does a kid fresh out of college know? Something had to be wrong. "Tell me about them," he said.

"If you want them, we can start operating tomorrow."

"Why wouldn't I want them? What have they got, two heads?"

Jerome gave a forced and unconvincing laugh. "Nothing like that. They're normal," he said, crashing into his chair. "Practically."

A long pause, and then Harry said, "Tell me the rest, Jerome."

A longer pause, and Jerome said, "Well . . . they're zombies."

Harry did not speak for two full minutes. Jerome sprawled back, legs outstretched, looking proud of himself. At last Harry said, "Zombies? Like voodoo?"

"Right. When you said you'd hire Sabu even though he was dead, I started thinking —"

"Jerome, you're crazy! You stay up all night watching monster movies, and it made you crazy!"

"Look at the advantages, Uncle Harry."

"A bunch of corpses walking around the shop is an advantage? It's a health hazard! Besides, it will scare the hell out of the other employees."

"There aren't any."

"How could there be? Once they find out they have to work with zombies, they'll quit."

"We don't need them. Zombies work harder than live people."

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"They do?"

Jerome nodded profoundly. "And they don't take breaks. They don't join unions. They don't sleep, they don't smoke, they don't eat, they don't go to the john, they don't get into fights over stealing somebody's girlfriend or boyfriend, they don't get hangovers. They just work."

"How fast?" Harry asked.

With a little shrug of concession, Jerome said, "All right, to tell the truth, they're on the slow side. But they make up for it by working around the clock."

Harry weighed that, then said, "So nobody's perfect. What other advantages?"

"They don't need medical benefits. No dental. No insurance. No pensions. No vacations. Minimum wage. No raises, ever."

"How can they live?"

"They don't have to."

Harry shook his head. "I forgot." After a moment's thought, he said, "So why should I pay them at all?"

Jerome drew in his legs, snapped to a commanding posture, and in a crisp no-nonsense voice said, "There has to be a payroll, Uncle Harry. If you've got employees and you're not sending in withholding and Social Security, you'll have the government in here."

"All right, we'll pay them. But how come I never heard about zombies in New York?"

"Zombies only operate in warm climates. I don't know why, but that's the only place you find them."

"Are these American zombies? I don't want the immigration people coming around. They're worse than the tax people."

"Definitely American, Uncle Harry. I checked their birth certificates. Also their death certificates.

"I don't want to know any more. Just get them in here," Harry said.

From the management point of view a zombie is the ideal worker. Unfortunately, zombies have serious personal shortcomings. They are not attractive to behold, and they smell awful. They move clumsily, and bump into things. They seldom speak, and when they do, they mumble in a halting monotone. To hear them out requires patience and a strong stomach.

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At first, Harry coped well. When the atmosphere of the shop became unendurable, he installed exhaust fans and introduced a program of daily hosing down of all employees. That helped. At Jerome's suggestion, he placed open boxes of bicarbonate of soda in strategic locations. The air quality improved a bit more.

The machines worked without stopping. Orders began to come in. Harry's prices could not be matched, and he shipped promptly. True, the goods had to be aired out for a day or two before they could be offered to the public, but no one complained.

The loading dock was the scene of steady activity. It was also the danger point, since it was the interface between his workers and the living. To avoid trouble, Harry gave strict orders that no one was to go to the loading dock without gloves, goggles, a safety mask, and a hat pulled down well over the ears. Even with these precautions, the occasional encounter was a cause for concern.

One day a driver made an irate entrance while Harry and Jerome were in the office. "What kind of people you got working for you, Mister Harry?" he demanded. "They don't answer a question. They don't say 'Hello,' 'Goodbye,' or 'Go to hell.' They don't say *nothing*. It's like being around a bunch of corpses."

Harry and Jerome sprang from their chairs, crying, "Don't say that!" in unison. "They're very sensitive," Harry said. "It's their religion," Jerome added.

"I don't want to insult anybody's beliefs, but they're weird people."

"They've been through a lot," Jerome said. Harry looked sympathetic and nodded.

"Well, you could tell them to talk to people. It don't hurt none to be neighborly," said the driver.

"I'll have a word," Harry said.

When the driver left, Harry slumped in his chair. He wiped his brow and reached for a cigar. His hand shook as he lit it. "We're finished, Jerome. I knew it was a crazy idea. People are noticing," he said in a low fearful voice.

"What are they noticing? The guys don't talk much — all right, we'll get them talking."

"Did you ever hear them talk? It's awful."

"They don't have to make speeches. We'll get them to say 'Have a nice day.'"

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"That's not going to be enough, Jerome."

"All right, we'll put radios in the shop. They can hear the news, the top forty, sports, weather. What more do you need for small talk?"

"Get a TV, too. It couldn't hurt."

The success of the scheme astounded Harry. Within ten days, the zombies were greeting one another with "What's up, buddy?" and "Way to go, baby." As the weeks passed, they added new expressions to their repertoire. Catch phrases from commercials and sportscasts, lines from TV comics, and the lyrics of hit songs were heard on the shop floor. Harry began to notice little knots of zombies standing around telling jokes and discussing baseball. He heard humming and whistling and the occasional sepulchral laugh. When he pointed these things out to Jerome, his nephew hailed them as positive image builders. But when Harry found three of his zombies and four drivers lounging about the loading dock telling risqüe stories, he put his foot down.

For a time, there was no more goofing off. The summer passed smoothly, and Harry was pleased with his handling of matters. No zombie was putting anything over on him. But late in September an unpleasant new phenomenon made itself evident. He began to find bits and pieces of his employees lying about the shop: a finger joint here, part of an ear there, a nose somewhere else. There was no slowdown, but Harry worried all the same. For one thing, it was nasty. For another, a man who is coming apart piece by piece is unlikely to perform at peak level. Harry spoke to Jerome.

"You've noticed it, too?" Jerome asked.

"It's not something you miss."

"You know what this means, don't you, Uncle Harry? It's a sign that they're unhappy."

"They got TV, they got radios, they got steady work. What's the problem?"

"I don't know, but I'm telling you they're unhappy. An unhappy zombie goes to pieces very quickly. We have to do something soon or this place will look like a —"

"Don't describe, Jerome," Harry broke in. He took a sip of water from the carafe on his desk and leaned back, breathing deeply and holding his stomach. After a time, he said, "How do you know so much about zombies? Is this what they teach in management?"

"I had to take a liberal arts course, so I took a seminar in classic horror

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films. We watched a lot of old movies. We were supposed to read a book, too, but nobody bothered."

A knock sounded at the office door. It was a muted knock, as if someone had tapped at the glass with a sponge. Harry and Jerome looked at each other, puzzled. No pickups or deliveries were due. No one was expected. Jerome shook his head and shrugged. Clearing his throat, Harry bid the visitor enter.

"How's. It going. Mister Harry?" said Vernon, one of the machine operators. He was dressed in clean, albeit ragged and faded, garments. His skin was a pale bluish-green with yellowish blotches, his eyes watery and vacant, his lips blue, his fingernails black. As he stood in the doorway, a fingernail dropped to the floor with a faint click. Harry covered his mouth and turned away.

"Good to see you, Vernon. What's up?" Jerome asked.

"The boys. Have sent. Me," Vernon said in a hollow monotone.

"Anything wrong?"

"We want. To watch. The playoffs."

Harry turned and gaped at him. "The playoffs?"

"And. The World. Series."

"Well, do it on your own time," Harry said.

Jerome leaned toward his uncle and whispered, "They don't have any, Uncle Harry. We should give them nights off. They'll work better."

"You think so?"

"I've been meaning to suggest it. If they get out in the fresh air they'll come to work in good spirits. They'll smell better, too."

Harry pondered for a full minute. In the midst of his pondering he pulled out his handkerchief and held it to his nose. "You really think they'll smell better?"

"Absolutely. And while they're gone, we can air out the shop."

That convinced Harry. He announced, "Vernon, tell the boys that from now on they can have evenings off. They should get a little fresh air. They could do their laundry."

"Way. To go. Boss," Vernon droned. One side of his face twitched slightly in what could have been an attempt at a smile. "Have. A nice. Day. Mister Harry. Mister Jerome."

When Vernon was gone, Harry turned to his nephew. Second thoughts were already assailing him. Before he could articulate a single one, Jerome

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lifted his hands in a gesture of reassurance.

"Uncle Harry, let me tell you something."

"Tell me we're ruined. I just cut production practically in half. I'm too old for such exasperation," Harry moaned.

"As soon as I started finding pieces of zombies around the shop, I knew we had a problem on our hands. So I lined up a night shift."

Harry looked up, astonished. "You found real people who are willing to work here? At night?"

"There's just one thing. Do we have a clean dry storage area where I can keep some boxes?"

"There's the loft. A miserable place. Bats, spiders, pitch dark even in the middle of the day." Harry shuddered at his own words.

"They'll love it. I'll have the boxes shipped here tomorrow."

"What's in the boxes?"

"The night shift."

Harry sat stunned for a time, then he leapt to his feet, toppling the chair. "Zombies isn't bad enough, you go find vampires!"

"They dress a lot better than zombies, and they don't smell funny. Some of them are from very good families."

"They bite people on the neck and suck their blood! Is this how a good family carries on?"

"They only do it when they're hungry, Uncle Harry. I can make sure they behave."

"Jerome, where did you find vampires? This is America. Zombies I can understand, but vampires?"

"There used to be a lot of Transylvanians in these parts. They brought things over from the old country. I learned about that in my course."

Harry studied him closely for a moment, then asked, "What did you get in that course?"

"An A-minus. If I read the book, I would have pulled an A."

THE VAMPIRES proved to be very dependable. Garlic strung around all windows and doorways kept them confined to the plant. There was no skylarking and bothering the neighbors. Instead there was work, and it was done quickly and efficiently, and without bad smells.

Harry was quite pleased with his new night shift. In a very few days he

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had taken to talking about "European workmanship" and praising them for their neatness. The employment of vampires, he learned, had only one truly unpleasant feature, and that he left to Jerome. Once a week, about half an hour before sundown, Jerome climbed up to the loft with a bucket of fresh blood from the local slaughterhouse, and left it in the center of the ring of coffins. Next morning, he removed the empty bucket. On feeding nights, productivity was always high.

Operations settled into a routine. Just before sundown, the zombies shambled off to their evening's activities. When the last one left, Harry and Jerome checked the protective garlic and headed for their cars. By the time they returned in the morning, the zombies were busy at their machines and the vampires were back in their boxes. Harry could not have asked for more.

One November morning he received a shock. A note was on his desk when he arrived, demanding a meeting that very evening. The note was signed, in a bold hand, "Count Radu."

Harry was huddled at his desk, jellied with fear, when Jerome arrived. It took Jerome some time to calm his uncle down.

"We'll wear garlic. He won't touch us, Uncle Harry," he assured him.

"Did you see his name? A Rumanian name. Rumanians love garlic."

"Only the live ones, Uncle Harry. Trust me. I got an A-minus, didn't I?"

"You didn't read the book. You should have read the book, Jerome. Maybe it told about vampires."

"Uncle Harry, I know about vampires. It won't be a problem."

At sundown, with ropes of garlic around their necks, they sat in the office awaiting their visitor. Count Radu's arrival was dramatic. One moment the doorway was empty; then came a sudden *crump*, like a sail unfurling, and a pale, ebon-haired, crimson-lipped man in elegant evening attire stood before them, his cloak slowly settling about his slender form.

"Good evening. I am Count Radu," he said in a heavily accented voice.

"He sounds just like Bela Lugosi in *Dracula!*" Jerome whispered.

"Pleased to meet you, Count. My name's Harry. I own the shop. This is my nephew Jerome, Director of Personnel."

"How do you like it here, Count?" Jerome asked.

"The work is . . . tedious," said Count Radu, accenting the final word.

"There's no heavy lifting. You sleep all day in a safe place, and there's a bucket of blood every week, without fail," Jerome pointed out. "Uncle

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Harry is a very caring employer."

"There is more to the world than blood and sleeping. We want to fly through the darkness . . . visit with the local peasants . . . feel the wind on our wings and listen to the children of the night . . . how they sing!" the Count rhapsodized.

Emboldened by the garlic, Harry said, "You want to bite people on the neck, that's what you want to do!"

With an aristocratic flick of the hand, Radu said casually, "Now and then. It is our nature."

"You can't do that here."

"You presume to dictate to Count Radu?" the vampire thundered, lunging forward with a swirl of his cloak.

"Careful. I'm wearing garlic," Harry said.

"Ah, yes. Garlic. My favorite garnish," said the Count with a smile that revealed oversized canines.

Harry crumpled into his chair. "I told you about Rumanians!" he said, his voice a tight little squeak.

Jerome was steadfast. "You're bluffing, Count. Hollywood doesn't lie about things like that."

With a low chuckle, Radu said, "Forgive me my little vampire joke. You are perfectly safe."

"Look, Count, my uncle is not a well man. I think we should continue this talk when he's feeling better," Jerome said.

"Is it his blood pressure?" Radu asked with sudden solicitude.

"No. His stomach."

"Ah. I can do nothing for stomach trouble. But I tell you our demands: time to fly freely in the world outside these walls, and blood twice a week."

"The blood you can have, but no flying. It's not our idea, Count, it's the law."

"Count Radu knows no law but his will!"

"That doesn't mean anything here, Count. You're welcome to fly around the plant all you like, but leaving it is out of the question. You go out and start nipping at the locals, and we'll be closed down within a week. They'll probably burn the place to the ground, with us in it."

"You refuse Count Radu?"

"You got your second bucket of blood. That's as far as we can go."

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Radu pointed a long slender finger at the young man. "Know that Count Radu is not confined against his will," he said in a soft ominous voice. He swirled his cloak around him, and on the instant the human form was gone. A huge bat circled the office, brushing Harry's pate, and then flew out the doorway.

"He's angry," Jerome said.

"A real trouble-maker, that one. Who knows what he's saying to the other vampires?"

"I'll get more garlic tomorrow."

"We should keep an eye on him," Harry said. He and Jerome looked at each other in silence. "Maybe we could get cameras."

"Vampires can't be photographed."

"We could tape them."

"They'd speak Rumanian." After a long silence, Jerome added, "What we need is a foreman."

"Where do we get a foreman who'll wear garlic around his neck all night and then work all day with people who go to pieces when they're not happy?"

"It won't be easy," Jerome said.

For two days Jerome did not show up at the office. His unexplained absence troubled Harry, especially as feeding time was at hand. He walked out on me, Harry thought. Couldn't take the pressure. Just when he was shaping up, he lost it. I can't handle this alone, the blood, the corpses, the bicarbonate of soda. I'm too old for such complications. It's time to sell. Who'll make an offer? I'll take anything. I'm definitely retiring, someplace nice and quiet, no zombies, no vampires, no ninety-percent humidity and mold and bugs. Alaska, maybe.

And then Jerome walked in, grinning, and placed a cardboard carton on Harry's desk. "You wanted a foreman, I got you a foreman."

Harry looked up, puzzled. "You got me a midget."

"Open it up, look, you'll see."

Inside, cradled in rolled-up newspapers, was a very old brass bottle. Harry removed it and stood it on his desk. "Very nice, Jerome, but you know I can't drink."

"Pull out the stopper."

Harry obliged. A geyser of dense black smoke erupted from the brass

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bottle, billowing upward, flattening against the ceiling and spreading outward, churning and rolling until it occupied half the office. Then it began to collapse upon itself, condensing and congealing; and suddenly a man stood before Harry, arms folded over his vast chest, beaming down on him.

The apparition was nearly seven feet tall, built like a lineman with a layer of off-season pudge over solid muscle. He wore a purple turban, a vest of crimson silk trimmed with gold, baggy green trousers, and yellow slippers with upturned toes. When the last wisp of smoke had dissipated, he dropped to his knees and touched his forehead to the floor at Harry's feet. Rising, he clasped his hands before him, palm to palm, and said, "What is thy will, O my master?"

"Isn't he great, Uncle Harry? Better than Rex Ingram in *The Thief Of Bagdad!*" Jerome said.

Harry nodded. He licked his lips, swallowed, and asked, "Are you a djinnee?"

"I am Jimmdash, son of Dahnash son of Shamhurish, last of a long line of djinn. My father and his father before him are mentioned in *The Book Of The Thousand Nights And One Night*, as all men know."

"Look, Jimmdash . . . can you be my foreman?"

Bowing, the djinnee said, "I can be anything my most bountiful master commands."

"Jerome, let's get him some clothes."

"Does my all-knowing master wish his lowly servant to attire himself in a different manner?"

"It would be better if you dressed like Jerome and me."

Jimmdash clapped his hands twice. A clothes rack appeared in the corner of the office. On it hung an almond-colored silk suit, a dozen bright sports shirts, and six pairs of slacks in muted pastels. Six pairs of shoes were lined up below the garments. Lying atop the rack was a flat box containing underwear and socks with Paris labels. Everything else was from Italy.

"Very good stuff, Jimmdash. You have real taste."

"If the beneficent master is satisfied, I shall proceed to dress," said the djinnee. He clapped his hands twice more, and on the instant stood in a brightly patterned Hawaiian shirt, mint green slacks, and white boating shoes. His former outfit was neatly arranged on the clothes rack.

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"You're beautiful. Jerome, he's beautiful!" Harry gushed.

"His most generous master's approbation gratifies this humble servant beyond his power to express."

"Jimmdash, I want you to get right to work. The day shift is still on the floor. I'm going to introduce you, so you'll have an idea of what you're working with."

"I already know, gracious master."

"Better and better. And look, you'd better not call me 'master.' Be informal. Call us 'Harry' and 'Jerome.'"

"Suits me, Harry. You can call me 'Jim.'"

Within minutes of meeting them, Jimmdash had the zombies won over. When one of them addressed him as 'Mister Dash' he grinned boyishly and said, "We're all family here. Y'all call me 'Jim,' you hear?" He spoke to each zombie in turn, addressing them by name, shaking hands and clapping backs firmly enough to establish manly rapport but not so forcefully as to dislodge limbs or digits. He capped his performance by pulling out a roll of bills, peeling off three twenties, and pressing them into Vernon's hand, saying, "Vernon, ol' buddy, you take these hard-working' friends of mine out and get them some beer. You do that right now. Y'all have yourselves a good time and come in here tomorrow ready to make these machines hum, you hear?"

"A born leader," Harry murmured.

"A take-charge guy," said Jerome.

When the last of the zombies had wambled out of earshot, Jimmdash turned and said in his earlier manner, "I believe I have established rapport with the day shift."

"Jim, they love you," Harry said. "Jerome, run up and put a note on the Count's coffin. Tell him we'll see him in the office at eight sharp. Let's go have dinner, Jim, and then you can meet the night shift."

AS THEY waited for Count Radu to appear, Jerome said, "Jim, I can't figure out why you're so good-natured. Being imprisoned in a brass bottle for three thousand years would make most people cranky."

"But I was not a prisoner. Imprisoned djinn are found only in copper flasks."

"You mean it was your idea?" Harry asked.

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Jimmdash took a long meditative pull on his cigar, exhaled the smoke in a thin jet, and said, "Not exactly. I lived in the time of Jan bin Jan, seventy-second sultan of all the djinn, and as it turned out, the last. Those were bad times for djinn. When things looked blackest, Jan bin Jan gave order that selected members of the younger generation be placed in brass bottles and concealed in various places throughout the world to await a better day. I was one of the chosen."

Jerome gave a low whistle. "All those centuries in a bottle.... It had to be worse than prison."

"Quite the contrary. I have the power to make myself infinitesimally small, so the bottle was a universe to me. Thanks to the benevolence and foresight of Jan bin Jan, it was equipped with all manner of conveniences and delights to help a resident pass the time pleasingly." Jimmdash smiled in happy reminiscence, puffed on his cigar, and went on, "But after a few thousand years, one looks forward to a change, even from limitless pleasure."

"I wouldn't," Harry said. "You're better off in the bottle, believe me. The world is a mess."

"But it is an *interesting* mess. I like this world of yours. I like Cajun cooking and cigars. I like ice cold 7-Up. I like sunglasses," the djinnee said, adjusting the oversized aviator glasses he had purchased on the way to dinner. "I like your climate. It is pleasantly warm, and not too dry."

Harry was still uneasy, but no longer terrified, as he had been a few nights before. The sight of that huge self-assured figure calmly puffing on a cigar had a pacifying effect. Harry even managed to retain his poise when a rush of vapor billowed up under the closed door and the Count appeared, looking every bit as sleek and menacing as before.

"So, you have come to grovel at the feet of Count Radu and beg his forgiveness," he greeted them.

"No. We came to introduce the new foreman," Harry said.

Jimmdash favored the Count with a barely perceptible nod. He said nothing. Count Radu glared at the opaque black lenses. Jimmdash blew a series of perfect smoke rings.

Suddenly Radu gave a shriek of demonic laughter and cried, "Fools! Fools! You have delivered this lackey into my hands! Watch now while I feast on his blood and make him my slave!"

He flung himself on the djinn, and in an instant was dangling in mid-

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air, kicking wildly. Jimmdash stood, raising him by his lapels until they were eye-to-eye and nose-to-nose.

"Know, thou flatulence of a spavined camel, that thou dealest with a djinnee, of a race that disdains the squeaking of bats and the apparition of clumsy buffoons in puffs of smoke,' Jimmdash said in a cold voice. "Anger me, and I will fall upon thee with the swiftness and thoroughness of the Destroyer of delights and the Sunderer of all societies, the Desolator of domiciles and Ravager of repose, he who annihilates both great and small, he who knows no pity for the poor and lowly and fears not the mighty and their armies." He dropped the dumbfounded vampire into the chair and glared down on him for a full minute, arms folded, face expressionless. Then, smiling affably, he stooped and began to smooth the Count's lapels, saying in honeyed tones, "On the other hand, befriend me and cooperate with me, and I will smooth the air beneath your wings, keep you safe from sunlight and meddlesome people with sharpened stakes, and see that there's a cup of nice warm blood by your coffin every morning at bedtime. Which is it to be?"

The vampire stared at him, blinked, and said, "The house of Radu are known throughout the world as friendly and cooperative people."

"Well, then, you just tell me what's on your mind and we'll see if we can't work things out. Make yourself comfortable, Count," said the djinnee, solicitous as a grandmother hovering over a whimpering moppet. He turned to ask, "Could one of you gentlemen give the Count a cigar? How about a nice cold 7-Up, Count?"

Radu raised a staying hand. "I never drink . . . 7-Up."

"Just like Bela Lugosi," Jerome murmured.

By eleven o'clock, agreement had been reached: in return for the Count's solemn word that there would be no drop in productivity and no sampling the locals, the night shift would be allowed two nights off each week to fly, prowl, shop, or pursue whatever other legal activity they chose. Radu was satisfied; Harry and Jerome were relieved.

As they walked to their cars, Harry said, "A very capable foreman, that Jimmdash."

"The guy's brilliant, Uncle Harry."

"Not brilliant, Jerome. Capable. If you're brilliant, you stay in the bottle."

For the next few weeks, it appeared that the djinnee had things well in

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hand. The plant became a happy place, and productivity rose steadily. The djinnee was known to all hands as "Jim," and to the locals as "J.D.," "Jimbo," or "Boss Dash." The day shift became active, in a restrained way, in community affairs, and organized a drive for the beautification of the local cemetery. Harry and Jerome maintained a low profile, but Jimmdash was regularly invited to service club luncheons, where his fund of stories and his ability to shift smoothly from good ol' boy patois to the cultured cadences of a man of the world made him a sought-after speaker.

Thus it came about that on the morning the police arrived at the plant, they asked to speak to Mister Dash. The djinnee loyally steered them away from his masters. Once the police car pulled out of the lot, Jimmdash broke the news to Harry and Jerome.

It seemed that a few of the vampires had fallen into bad company and taken to drinking on their free evenings. Since they had a full day to sleep off the effects, their excesses had escaped notice.

On the previous night, one of them had attended a riotous bachelor party and started for home in a state of extreme disequilibrium shortly before dawn. To save time, he had assumed bat mode and taken to wing, but he was in no condition to fly. He had crashed into the windshield of a truck on the Interstate near Harry's factory. Before the shaken driver's eyes, his broken figure had taken human form and then, as the sun appeared on the horizon, it had crumbled into a heap of dust, bones and rags. The police had questions, and they wanted answers.

"Before this day is out, the police will return. Representatives of the media have already shown interest," said Jimmdash. Harry gave a weak cry of despair. With scarcely a pause, the djinnee continued, "Once the story is out, inquiries will come from the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Internal Revenue Service, the county board of health, the National Labor Relations Board, the Occupational Safety and Health —"

"Stop! I don't want to know!" Harry cried. "This is terrible."

"Not to worry. If you wish, I will remove all of us and the factory to a remote region of the world. There is a mountaintop in Assam —"

"Bad enough I left New York. Who wants Assam?"

"It's better than jail, Uncle Harry," Jerome said.

"For you, maybe. I'm too old for such a move."

In his mind, Harry could already hear the sirens, the ultimatum growled over the bullhorn, the splintering of doors, smashing of windows,

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cries, shots. All around him, the zombies worked on, unperturbed. He gestured to them and said, "What about these guys? They'll all be thrown out of work."

"If you wish to save the business," said Jimmdash, "a speedy arrest and a full confession will satisfy the authorities."

"Who's to arrest? What's to confess?"

"Don't look at me! I have my whole life ahead of me!" Jerome said, backing away.

"A crime of passion would be the best explanation. A rare poison slipped into his drink by a jealous rival will explain his rapid dissolution."

"But he was a *bat!* The driver saw a *bat!*"

"I doubt that he will stress that fact, Harry. He wishes to remain employed. The factory will be safe."

Harry threw up his hands. "I don't care anymore. In New York I had high taxes, high rent, absenteeism, stealing, every week a fight in the shipping room, drug deals in the john — people problems. Here it's zombies, vampires, fingers on the floor, a foreman out of a brass bottle . . . I'm too old for this. I should have retired."

"You must not allow yourself to become discouraged, Harry. You have a good operation here. You have built something," said the djinnee, putting his arm around Harry's shoulder.

"You like it? Make me an offer."

"I will do that, Harry. I have often thought how pleasant it would be if I were Jerome's partner. His senior partner."

"I can live with that. Just keep me out of the slammer," Jerome said.

Harry saw a plot hatching under his very nose. "Wait a minute," he said. "If you two are partners, what am I supposed to do — sign a confession and go to jail?"

Jimmdash beamed upon him. "Yes and no, Harry," he said. "Let me explain."

At four-thirty that afternoon, the police led a staggering, mute figure from the factory in handcuffs. Jerome looked on, sobbing and wailing, "It was the heat! The heat drove him to it! In New York, my Uncle Harry wouldn't step on a cockroach, but here, he's a murderer!"

The perpetrator did not speak. He walked like a man in a trance, gazing blankly before him. Twice he stumbled and had to be supported by the

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officer on either side. He was a pitiable broken figure.

When the police were gone, Jerome heaved a deep sigh and said, "I never thought we'd get away with it."

Jimmdash snapped his fingers. "A piece of halvah. I only wish I had remembered how to do the voice. I have not worked this particular one for nearly thirty-two hundred years, and I am rusty on the details."

"Maybe it's better the thing doesn't talk."

"Perhaps. In any event, the fingerprints are perfect."

"How long will it last?"

The djinnee shrugged. "Long enough to take the heat off."

"I wish Uncle Harry could have heard you say that. He never liked the heat," Jerome said with a fond nostalgic smile.

Harry could not hear. Had he heard, he would not have cared a lot. Feeling brisk as a boy and wise as a patriarch, he was seated amid plump cushions on a carpet gliding silently through a cool azure immensity. One inexpressible sensation followed upon another, and the splendor of the here and now made the memory of his old life a pallid and piteous thing, faint and distant and fast fading from memory.

Leaf-light, he drifted down through perfumed air to circle a garden ringed with walls of crystal and gold, where houris of surpassing beauty looked up with dark eyes full of welcome. In honeyed voices they sang of love and happiness and repose, delight beyond words enjoyed amid celestial music, the scent of ever-blossoming flowers, and the taste of ever-ripe fruits. He might spend a day in their company — or a thousand years of unchanging youth. Then, if he chose, he would be a ship skimming the waves, or the waves themselves in the wild exuberance of a storm, or an eagle in some mountain aerie where the air was cold and diamond-clear, or monarch in a palace at the heart of an empire. He could be any one, or all of them in turn. He could be anything and everything else he had ever desired, here in his private universe within this tarnished, age-encrusted brass bottle.

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BOOKS

JOHN KESSEL

TODAY'S TRUTH

Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Science Fiction, ed. by Larry McCaffery, Duke University Press, 344 pp., illustrated. $17.95 Trade paper.

Globalhead, by Bruce Sterling, Mark V. Ziesing, 301 pp., $29.95

The Hacker Crackdown, by Bruce Sterling, Bantam, 328 pp., $23.00

Kalifornia, by Marc Laidlaw, St. Martin's Press, 245 pp.

SIX YEARS ago, in an article on cyberpunk for James Gunn's *New Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, I wrote that "by mid-1987, although readers and critics were still reacting, to writers the cyberpunk debate was pretty much over."

The debate may be over but cyberpunk is with us stronger than ever. William Gibson, who for better or worse is likely to have the label branded on his forehead for the rest of his career, has even been identified by *Time* magazine as an adjunct member of the "cultural elite" (take that, Dan Quayle!). The term has moved into the public vocabulary, and at this point I'd say it will keep spreading as people use it to describe things that have little to do with the initial stories that got called cyberpunk.

The word *cyberpunk* has fractured into several meanings; here's my best guess as to what those that have anything to do with science fiction are today:

1) A publishing category. A subgenre consisting of Xeroxes of Gibson's moves. Near future, high tech, noir atmosphere, criminal hero, jacking into computers, multinationals, drugs, pop culture.

2) A conceptual category, another word for what Bruce Sterling has called radical hard SF.

3) An academic critical label. SF that is stylistically aware of main-

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stream effects, that reflects the postmodern condition (whatever that is). Art that fractures cultural references, attacks structures of cognition, questions the idea that personal identity is fixed.

Let's look at the last one first. But before that I want to digress a little bit about academic literary critics. If you can't imagine caring about this, I invite you to flip ahead to safer text.

One of the ways an ambitious professor can make his reputation is to hitch his wagon to a particular star and hope, through his efforts, to make that writer, literary movement or critical method famous. F.R. Leavis, for instance, familiar to SF readers as the man who took the anti-science side in the "Two Cultures" debate with C.P. Snow, is better known in academic circles for inventing (he would say identifying) "The Great Tradition" in the English novel. Leavis looked over 250 years of British fiction and anointed just five novelists (Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and D.H. Lawrence) to sainthood. Everybody else, from Charles Dickens to James Joyce, was chopped liver. Now in my opinion it's damned arguable that Lawrence is a better novelist than Joyce or Virginia Woolf or E.M. Forster, (don't even try to put forward Aldous Huxley or H.G. Wells), but for Leavis the difference in quality was self-evident, and he carried a lot of people with him for a long time.

Which shows you what chutzpah can do if you have the intellectual credentials. It certainly helps if you can make a persuasive argument. You may even be right. But bald-faced assertion, as if no sensible person could imagine otherwise, often carries the day.

What's this got to do with cyberpunk? Quite a lot, in fact.

Larry McCaffery, who teaches English at San Diego State University, is trying an F.R. Leavis move with science fiction as part of his great tradition. A few years ago he did an excellent book of interviews with contemporary SF writers, *Across the Wounded Galaxies*, just recently he guest edited the fiction issue of an electronic journal called *Postmodern Culture*, and in 1988 he edited a cyberpunk issue for the *Mississippi Review*. *Storming the Reality Studio* is a casebook of readings "dedicated to the proposition that the interaction between genre SF and the literary avant garde . . . needs to be noted, discussed, and encouraged."

The first half of this book is a collection of stories, poems, comics and excerpts from novels by writers ranging from Pat Cadigan, Lucius

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Shepard and John Shirley to Don DeLillo, Ted Mooney and Kathy Acker, from *Neuromancer* to *White Noise*. The second half gathers critical opinion, including that of heavyweight postmodernists like Fredric Jameson, SF critics like Joan Gordon and Veronica Hollinger, and SF writers like Tom Maddox and Bruce Sterling.

The purpose is to make a case for SF's importance (while incidentally making a case for Larry McCaffery's perspicacity). The difference between McCaffery's effort and previous ones is the basis on which he mounts an argument.

The problem in the past has been that, when judged by traditional standards, SF is unrealistic. For most of the twentieth century, serious fiction had to be concerned with sharp observation of the contemporary social scene, depth psychology, everyday life and everyday characters. Think of John Updike, John Steinbeck, John O'Hara. American critics were willing to give Latin Americans or central Europeans the latitude to be wildly fantastic, but not residents of Connecticut. Add to that American SF's association with pulp magazines, TV and movies, and the case for SF as literature was next to hopeless.

But the rise of mavericks like Robert Coover and Donald Barthelme in the '60s and '70s, along with postmodern literary criticism's challenges to traditional standards (postmodern critics *like* pulp magazines, TV and movies), offer the critic of SF an opportunity to make an end run around realism. This is McCaffery's argument. The cyberpunks' work "represents the most concerted effort yet by artists to find a suitable means for displaying the powerful and troubling technological logic that underlies the postmodern condition. Mixing equal measures of anger and bitter humor, technological know-how and formal inventiveness, postmodern SF should be seen as the breakthrough 'realism' of our time."

It's not an untenable assertion, but it's one that creates a new map of the SF world, a lot like those posters of the United States as seen from New York City. In the foreground is a huge Manhattan with landmarks from Columbus Circle to SoHo, then beyond the island a big patch of ground labeled New Jersey, with the rest of the country crammed into the remote distance: little dots for Las Vegas and L.A. Substitute cyberpunk for Manhattan and you have McCaffrey's picture of contemporary SF. "Postmodern SF" is a lot larger than "cyberpunk," and to the extent that McCaffery uses the terms interchangeably, I find his argument shaky.

For example, in the genre world

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William Gibson is a cyberpunk and Kim Stanley Robinson most definitely is not. But if you judge by some of the definitions of postmodernism offered in *Reality Studio*, then a book like Robinson's *The Gold Coast* qualifies. In a list of works titled "Cyberpunk 101," McCaffery and Richard Kadrey include Barry Malzberg's *Galaxies*, calling it "pure postmodernism in SF drag" (as apt a description as any) without acknowledging that Malzberg is the kind of New Wave literateur the cyberpunks said they were reacting against. Even if you're trying to identify cyberpunk's forerunners this list is idiosyncratic; I don't know why *Brave New World* shouldn't be on the list as much as *Frankenstein*, and the only reason *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* is there instead of a dozen other Dick novels is because *Blade Runner* was based on it. And yoking contemporary SF with the *avant garde* makes a writer like John Shirley more important than Joe Haldeman or Tim Powers or Connie Willis.

What we've got here is a case of what academics call "canon formation"; in compiling this book, McCaffery, whether it is his intention or not, is creating a list of the most worthy examples of modern SF.

Lest you think I reject this, I don't. We already have our own canon of "great" SF, generated by the Hugos and Nebulas and by critics in the field from Algis Budrys to Damon Knight. McCaffery is just offering one based on new principles. Moreover, I can tell you his version has a pretty good chance of selling to the academic audience. They are not going to see it the way the fans, editors and writers do. For example, the whole extent to which postmodern SF, including cyberpunk, arises out of traditions going back to the twenties is likely to remain invisible to them, leading to some hilarious — if instructive — misreadings. But who's to say some of these readings won't make us see SF in a fresh light?

Anyway, it's out of our control. McCaffery is one of the people setting the discourse for academic discussion of SF. No matter how skeptical I or anyone else may be about his thesis, this is likely to become the "truth" until somebody with similar credentials, knowledge, energy, interest, and a forum to express his opinions comes along with another version.

I think Bruce Sterling is the most influential SF writer of the 1980s. Not the best selling, or the most popular, or the most honored. Certainly not the most reasonable — much of the furor aroused by his

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notorious flyer *Cheap Truth* was a result of Sterling's desire to say credible things in the most confrontational way possible. Unlike Gibson, Sterling doesn't have writers imitating his style or setting stories in his milieu. The difference between their influences is rather like that between the influences of Robert Heinlein and John W. Campbell on 1940s SF. Like Campbell (and Damon Knight in the fifties), Sterling is adept at F.R. Leavis-type assertion. A raft of writers today do not set electron to screen without the vision of Chairman Bruce rising before them. Even when they disagree with him, he's gotten inside their heads and changed the way they think about SF. This is not a matter of them adopting Sterling's answers, but of them asking Sterling's questions.

Putting aside all the psychodrama he likes to arouse (he once said that upon realizing he'd gained an audience through his writing, he felt like he had hold of a crowbar and was ready to smash something), the first item of Sterling's creed is conceptual originality. Forget McCaffery's postmodern bells and whistles: Sterling's brand of cyberpunk follows in longstanding SF traditions. As much as the classic *Astounding* writer, he's an idea man.

There's an old SF joke where the fan asks the writer, "Where do you get your ideas?" and the writer says, "From a post office box in Schenectady." Reading Sterling I never feel he needs that box number, but sometimes I think he could use the neighboring box that dispenses plots. For Sterling it's the stories, not the ideas, that are problematic. For him, stories and characters are only the means to an end.

That would normally be considered a weakness. The power of the stunning tale and the fascinating character we grant to Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Faulkner — the great humanist writers — is not natural to Sterling. Is this a damning flaw? I don't think so. Sterling (the son of Olaf Stapledon, with a sense of humor) has reminded me that SF can be good for reasons having little to do with story and character.

Not only that, but Sterling's focus on ideas allows him to evade the problems that those of us who try, with our limited talents, to play on Tolstoy's field risk — bathos, melodrama, moralizing. It enables him to avoid emotional slither, sentimentality, and ordinary power fantasy (you may get some extraordinary power fantasy). His best work has a kind of cleanness. Intellectual rigor. Freshness. Friends, Bruce Sterling may be crazy, he may violate taste, he may abandon good sense — but he's NOT STUPID.*

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Sterling's new collection *Globalhead* shows him working at both ends of his spectrum, from his most successful attempts at conventional story to experiments with SF not dependent on story at all. It is not as coherent a collection as 1989's *Crystal Express*, and not so much "cyberpunk" as "postmodern SF," but its high points are better than the best of that book.

At the postmodern end, pieces like "The Compassionate, the Digital," "The Sword of Damocles" and "Our Neural Chernobyl" evade the responsibility of story entirely, adopting the forms of the book review, the political speech, and a metafictional retelling of an ancient tale to put across his SF ideas. These techniques have been used to good effect by postmodernists from Jorge Luis Borges to Stanislaw Lem, and Sterling does not waste the opportunity they present.

"Hollywood Kremlin" and "Are You For 86" are political satires; "The Moral Bullet" and "Storming the Cosmos" are collaborative comedies on political themes. "The Shores of Bohemia," one of my favorites, is either a Gene Wolfian far-future extrapolation on the effects of nanotechnology and cultural mutation on human character and society, or an allegory for Sterling's (reluctantly) ceding control over the cyberpunk movement to other hands — probably both.

And though Sterling may long for the cold inhuman brilliance of a Stapledon, he has more ability to deal with people than old Olaf, and the strongest stories in this book are the ones that best integrate his ideas with conventional story values.

"Jim and Irene," for instance, is a quirky romance between an underground petty criminal who makes his living ripping off pay phones, and a penniless Russian immigrant he meets when their clothes are stolen from a laundromat. Jim is brought into the world of the human by Irene. Only its final mystical moment, where the two discover they can physically see the abstract bonds that tie people together, qualifies this story as fantasy. Yet the feeling for character and the quality of the writing are among Sterling's best.

In "Dori Bangs," Sterling adopts a highly rhetorical voice to tell a story about an alternate-world relationship between the doomed rock critic Lester Bangs and the doomed comic artist Dori Seda. In it Sterling, erstwhile *enfant terrible*, pits the youthful rage to change the world or die

* *I offer this to some enterprising publisher free of charge: an honest cover blurb. And while I'm claiming honesty here let me confess some self-interest; although we've debated a few topics, Sterling is a friend, and I co-wrote one of the stories in* Globalhead.

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trying against an acceptance of limitation and growing old.

"We See Things Differently" is a brooding story about the visit of an arab muslim to a near-future America in decline. Crammed with observation and extrapolation, this view from outside the West shows us how we look to someone for whom our pieties are hypocrisies, our open minds are closed, our cultural exports are attempts to corrupt and dominate. I haven't read a more acute or powerful political SF story since Lucius Shepard's "R&R."

One thing clearly evident in this collection is just how much Sterling's imagination turns to wry comedy. Dark or light, Sterling's stories are *funny*. Cultural relativist to the core, he loves to challenge assumptions, even his own. In at least half a dozen of these stories he presents scenes in which an insouciant character challenges, without rancor and almost incidentally, the sacred cows of some uptight right-thinker. The uptight character sputters in indignation while the challenger calmly goes about his/her business. The victim can be a Soviet socialist, a pro-choice underground smuggler, a radical American rocker, a humanitarian doctor. There's something invigorating about a writer so unwilling to massage our prejudices. I don't know where Sterling is going from here, but I'm glad the days of guys in mirrorshades are behind him, and I'm interested in following his evolution.

Let me commend also the physical presentation of this book (and of all the books published by Mark V. Ziesing**), which is first rate, with sewn bindings, interior book design by SF writer Robert Frazier, and stunning computer-generated dustjacket art by William Latham.

In *The Hacker Crackdown*, his first non-fiction book, Sterling explores the real world of cyberpunks, which turns out to be a lot different from the fictional one. Here the issues are not as clear, the heroes and villains less differentiated, the action less romantic, and the resolutions less decisive.

The book delineates the efforts of various government agencies and private security services to crack down on the hacker underground, which grew in expertise and boldness throughout the eighties to the point where authorities suspected hackers of causing the crash of AT&T's long distance system in January 1990.

The Hacker Crackdown takes the side neither of the digital underground nor the cops. I'm impressed

** *available from Mark V. Ziesing, P.O. Box 76, Shingletown, CA 96088*

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with Sterling's ability to marshall facts and untangle a very tangled story. In the course of telling it he has to take long digressions into areas ranging from the development of electronic systems to the history of the secret service (which, because of its responsibility for policing counterfeiters, inherited jurisdiction over electronic crime). The virtue of seeing things anew that powers his fiction is evident here, as, for example, in his history of the telephone network, seen, in this context, as the forerunner of "cyberspace."

Sterling's ability as a fiction writer to delineate character also serves him well. He's a sharp observer, both of the hackers and the police. He likes people who are not in the mainstream. One of the discoveries of this book is that in many ways the people who police cyberspace are just as eccentric as the hackers who endanger it. Sterling writes with similar affection, for instance, of Arizona Assistant Attorney General Gail Thackeray and New York hacker/phone phreak Phiber Optik.

I particularly like the personal bits of this story, as when Sterling, locked out of a meeting of cops, occupies his time by doing some amateur computer "crime" in a hotel office, rifling through a wastebasket to find useful computer information. The book is full of similar paradoxes. Sterling recognizes the attractiveness of hacking, yet he is deeply aware of moral complexity, the risks involved in the power of computers and the power of law enforcers.

In the end the prosecution of the hackers came to very little, but the privacy and security issues raised by the crackdown have fostered the development of new organizations and legal proposals to deal with the world of cyberspace, including the Electronic Frontier Foundation, about which I'm sure we will be hearing more.

I hope this book is successful and earns Sterling a reputation outside of our field. But I still think his talents are better suited to fiction, and I hope he'll get back to it. Meanwhile, *The Hacker Crackdown* is full of information, good humor, and more ideas for SF stories than you'll find this side of Schenectady.

Sterling wrote in 1989, "Science fiction today is a lot like the contemporary Soviet Union . . . a self-perpetuating commercial power-structure which happens to be in possession of a traditional national territory: a portion of bookstore rackspace."

Modern publishers don't know what to do with an SF writer until they can place him (or his latest

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book) in some corner of that territory. Is he a Ukranian or a Lithuanian, a military SF writer or a high fantasist? This is where that first definition I gave at the beginning comes in: to publishers cyberpunk is a new republic in the union, a new corner of the rackspace. So an attempted revolution becomes a commodity.

This presents problems for writers: you can't just write, you have to decide which part of the bookstore rack is your home territory. Marc Laidlaw has been called a cyberpunk; he had a story in Sterling's anthology *Mirrorshades*, and an excerpt from his first novel, *Dad's Nuke*, is included in *Storming the Reality Studio*. *Kalifornia*, his third novel, is not cyberpunk in the Gibson mode, but in presenting a future media-obsessed America bears all the earmarks of postmodern SF. Since there's no "postmodern SF" rack in your local bookstore, St. Martin's is billing it as "a brilliant novel in the satirical tradition of Philip K. Dick."

Here's the moon in the mid-21st century:

> From the moment they landed, Sandy's disappointment knew no bounds — unlike the lunar living space. It was like a giant hamster warren, a habimall without exit doors. They could have been almost anywhere on earth; even the reduced gravity, which was supposed to keep husbands from tiring while wives shopped, only succeeded in making everyone constipated.... The potentially awesome views from their hotel were spoiled by the sprawl of tektite-processing plants and Bova-burger restaurants that surrounded the moonmall.
>
> Marjorie suggested a moonwalk... It took hours to get into wilderness; man had been on the moon for nearly eighty years, after all — plenty of time to mess it up.

This in-your face assault on SF's pieties about space colonization is typical of cyberpunk's re-imagining of the future. *Kalifornia* is full of amusing background details: genetic engineered manimals, videoheads, popstar governor/reverends, the Pope of Las Vegas, TV seers. People wired into their favorite TV star's sensorium. Laidlaw fuses extrapolation of media-saturated culture with a frenetic satire of the current-day U.S.

If Sterling's radical hard SF is one type of fiction where idea dominates story, satire is another. It's no surprise that some of the best SF has been satirical, and that often satirists who have no connection to the genre end up writing SF. Huxley on one side, Pohl & Kornbluth on the other, with Vonnegut in the middle. Given the present state of the world, satirical SF is a natural, and one of

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the reasons all those mainstreamers from DeLillo to Mark Leyner are writing something like SF is that they are reading the same newspapers, watching the same TV shows.

The problem with satire is that in the service of scoring points it often sacrifices the character identification that we look for in fiction — yet most novelists know instinctively that to do so is to lose the power to affect readers emotionally that is the whole point of writing to change the world. Satirists are angry people, and they want you to shape up RIGHT NOW! They want you, between guffaws, to feel awful about how screwed up things are, and the best way to do that is to make you *care* about Winston Smith or John Savage or Billy Pilgrim. So *Kalifornia* veers on occasion toward realism, asking us to identify with the plight of its characters. But the plot is full of unbelievable incidents. In the first chapter Poppy Figueroa, star of "Poppy on the Run" gives birth (totally unassisted, in a dingy hotel) and twenty minutes later is dodging killers on a fire escape. Her newborn infant, Calafia, is kidnapped by a mysterious feminist sect and transformed into Kalifornia, or "Kali," a cyborged creature able to manipulate the entire population of the U.S. (and the electronically connected world) through their wires. At the age of six months Kali thinks and speaks with the subtlety of an adult. Yet aside from the fact that she's been wired from conception there is no explanation of this miracle. The story line starts and stops like a nervous squirrel, and at the end a villain and a resolution are pulled out of the background almost haphazardly.

I think plausibility is inevitably stretched in satire, but if you want to pull the reader in then the characters must be well motivated even when the background is absurd. As a satire on a media-obsessed future (and present) this is a funny book, but as a story about real people or a credible extrapolation it's only intermittently believable. For whatever reason, I could not care about the perils of the Figueroa family. *Kalifornia* is full of biting satire and amusing incident, but despite its manifest cleverness it fails to move me in the end.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

The Man Who Knew Infinity: A Life of the Genius Ramanujam, Robert Kanigel (Pocket/Washington Square Press, trade paper, 438pp, $12)

IT IS a measure of Kanigel's achievement as a scientific biographer that I, who never got past high school geometry (that's right, I have no clue what a cosine is), had no trouble understanding or at least grasping the importance of the mathematical achievements of Ramanujam; more important, though, is the fact that Kanigel brought the man to life in a story that is moving without trying to deify the man.

Ramanujam was born in southern India in the latter part of the 19th century, a time when the Indian education system was geared toward training clerks for the British colonial regime. Yet some of his teachers and some of the leading intellectuals of southern India were able to recognize that Ramanujam, as nonconformist and obnoxious as he could sometimes be, might well be a mathematical genius instead of the crank that most assumed he was. A fervent letter from Ramanujam finally met fertile ground in the hands of a brilliant English mathematician, G. H. Hardy, who, despite Ramanujam's self-invented notation and his ignorance of — or disdain for — rigorous proofs, recognized almost immediately what Ramanujam was.

And so Hardy — by way of Trinity College — reached out to India and plucked Ramanujam out of obscurity. The result was a body of work so innovative and so daunting that only now are some of the proofs finally being found for Ramanujam's ideas. On a scientific level, bringing Ramanujam to England was a triumph. On a personal level, though, it was a disaster of cultural clashes and unbearable climatic changes. The Indian climate killed many a European; what is forgotten is that in the age before antibiotics and central heating, northern Europe

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could be just as deadly to those used to warmer climes. England recognized Ramanujam and made him a player on the world stage in an era when most Europeans assumed that mathematics was a European show; England also gave him tuberculosis and sent him home, lonely and dying, to a family that had already been torn apart by reactions to his fame and prosperity.

In the end, I was left with a feeling reminiscent of Grey's *Elegy*: Ramanujam's path to mathematics itself and to making contact with the rest of the mathematical world seems so unlikely, so dependent upon chance and accidents of character, that one wonders how many mute inglorious Ramanujams there may be who live and die in obscurity, neither known nor knowing what they might accomplish.

The biography is thick; Kanigel's skill is such that it never felt long; and, at the end, I only wished that it had been longer. I wished, I think, for the novel, for the author who could get inside Ramanujam and tell us all that could only be hinted at or hidden by the documentary evidence. But that is not biography. All that biography can do, Kanigel did, and did well.

October Moon, Michael Scott (O'Brien Press, 20 Victoria Road, Dublin 6, Ireland, ISBN 0-86278-300-3, paper, 159pp, £3.99)

It happened that I was fortunate enough to be present when Scott's newest young adult novel was launched at the Irish national convention this past October. I was impressed that Scott, whose work is widely published both in America and Britain, had made the bold decision to launch his new book with an Irish publisher; it reminded me of similarly bold acts by some noted Canadian writers. I also took an immediate liking to Scott himself, a man of musical speech, unflappable charm, and incisive wit.

All of that combined to put *October Moon* into my hands and get me to open the first page. From there, though, what pulled me on was a compelling story, not really of horror, but of dread. Rachel Stone, an American girl, is brought to Ireland by her father, who has bought a horse farm there. Even before they arrive, however, they are beset by problems. Someone is burning down buildings on the farm. And after she gets there, to her chagrin Rachel finds that the local police are convinced that she herself is carrying out (or making up) the acts of sabotage and harassment that dog her and her family.

Needless to say, the threats are quite real, tied up with a local clan that is under an ancient curse and

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sees a chance to win free of it — at the expense of Rachel's family. Scott is a master of the naturally unfolding mystery, and the tension never lets up as he takes Rachel — and us — deeper into the darkness. In the peculiar genre of young adult horror, which must satisfy both the grisly instincts of teenagers and the fastidious tastes of the adults who buy for YA library collections (or complain to school boards about them!) Scott treads the fine line gracefully. In short, the kids won't be disappointed, and the adults won't be upset. Wish I understood how he did it.

One minor point is worth pointing out, though. In creating an American girl, Scott nevertheless has her say things no American girl would say: for instance, "half six" instead of "half-past six." Since the book is being published in the British Isles, where such Britishisms excite no comment, no harm is done; but it served me as a reminder of the fact that no matter how careful or well educated you are in someone else's culture, you *will* get it wrong, somewhere, somehow. No doubt British readers chuckle over the American depiction of Englishmen, too — when they're not gritting their teeth! It's a good thing we sci-fi writers don't ever have to face people from the alien or future races we invent. We *don't*, do we?

Ganwold's Child, Diann Thornley (Synapse Press [order copies by sending check/money order for $7.95 (includes $1.00 postage and handling) to Synapse Press, PO Box 284 Xenia OH 45385] paper, 437pp, $6.95)

The awful cover of this book makes it look self-published, though it was not; and at the end of the book the note from the publisher makes it plain that he thinks that going straight from the author's word processing files to typeset copy without ever hitting paper till the end is somehow remarkable — but that's been going on for years, with much better results, I might add, than the obvious 300 dpi laser printer type in this book.

My first thought on receiving a review copy, especially since I was somewhat acquainted with the author, was a sense of sadness that Thornley had lost faith in her own novel and had given up on the mainline sf publishers. Assuming that the book had been rejected by all the regular editors, I put off reading it, fearing that it would be one of those awful experiences where I eventually had to find some nice way of telling a friend how much I "enjoyed" reading their book.

My mistake.

While *Ganwold's Child* is definitely a first novel, in the sense that

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the author is not yet comfortable with the amount of *room* in the novel form, and therefore elides a great deal of the sort of information that provides depth of character and a more graspable pace, it is nevertheless a very *good* first novel. In most ways it seems to fall within that sf subgenre that can only be called "military bildungsroman" in which a youngster plunges into a demanding military environment and is forced to find out just how good he is. But Thornley subverts and transforms that subgenre at every turn. Far from being a sudden genius at flying space fighters, for instance, the hero, Tristan, finds it difficult indeed, particularly because of cultural and educational barriers caused by his upbringing among a tribe of relatively primitive aliens.

The story is also one of the child discovering his true identity — unknown to him, his father is a great military leader who did not know that his wife and child survived a disastrous battle in space. An enemy finds Tristan and holds him hostage, and much of the plot concerns Tristan's escape and his attempt to save his mother from the same enemy — and also from a wasting disease that threatens to kill her.

But the strength of the book is in Thornley's focus on the alien society and the way that it causes Tristan to see the world differently from other humans — even as he also sees the world differently from the Ganan. The Ganan friend who accompanies him on his journey is a constant source of strength and self-control for him; and yet he is also something of an albatross, keeping Tristan from fully assimilating to human culture. Reading the novel, I found myself torn between wanting Tristan to assimilate — and wanting him never to lose some of the strange yet ennobling folkways of the Ganan.

If you make the effort to order this book from the publisher — about the only way to lay hands on it unless you frequent some bookstores in Dayton — you'll find that Thornley's first novel has a bit of raggedness here and there. A way of suddenly putting minor characters in center stage by writing from their viewpoint. Front-loading the book with a lot of technical jargon. A tendency to use military-speak as if we lay people were expected to understand it.

But as you read on, you'll realize that the flaws are minor compared to the strength of the story and the storyteller. Perhaps, when a mainline sf publisher recognizes the value of this author and this book and reprints it for the mass market, we'll see a bit of revision — not much is really needed. And as for that military-speak, the fact is that unlike

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most writers who toss that stuff in for fake authenticity, Thornley was career military and she uses that language because that's the way military people express their military ideas economically. This novel is exemplary for showing how the effective military mind really works — you'll find no romantic military nonsense here.

Don't judge this book by its cover. If there's any justice, those who seek out copies of this book now, in its 500-copy (yes, that's five hundred) first edition, will have a collector's item when Thornley hits her stride and emerges as an important voice within the sf field. But don't buy it for financial speculation. Buy it because you're going to read it. It's worth the extra effort that laying hands on it will take.

Dragon's Milk, Susan Fletcher (Atheneum, cloth, 242 pp; Alladin, paper)

I admit, I'm enough of a diehard sf reader that the idea of an egg-laying reptile nursing its young was annoying. But what am I asking for? After all, these dragons spew fire and their young *float* when they sleep. I should quibble over them also producing milk? If you buy the idea of dragons at all, it's ludicrous to argue that they can't have mammalian traits!

What matters here is that working within a traditional framework, Fletcher has crafted a sweet but tough story of an ugly duckling of a girl who, in order to save a beloved youngster, goes into the den of a dragon to get its healing milk. To save her life, she strikes a tough bargain with the dragon: she'll babysit the dragon's young while the dragon is off getting meat to keep its strength. In exchange, she gets the milk — but she must return and do it again.

Young Kaeldra finds herself becoming quite devoted to her young charges, and soon she must protect them from their only real enemy — human dragon hunters. I couldn't help but feel a bit of sympathy for the dragon hunters. After all, the people in the area are losing a remarkable number of sheep, not just to the mother dragon, but also to the youngsters as they grow up. These flocks are their life — they're supposed to sit back and let themselves be impoverished because dragons get so gosh-darned hungry?

Among the hunters, Kaeldra finds unexpected but unpredictable allies, and eventually what began as an almost domestic story becomes a story of war with large-scale issues involved. And so what at first looked like it could easily become a fantasy version of *The Babysitters' Club* turned out to be another in a long tradition of Atheneum young adult

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fantasies that are then marketed in paper as adult fantasy. While Fletcher is not Patricia McKillip (one of the early beneficiaries of this publishing practice) and *Dragon's Milk* is not *The Throme of the Erril of Sherrill*, that hardly counts against either the author or the book. Fletcher is herself, and develops her own angles to explore in a story that finds new life in the old dragon lore.

New Worlds, David Garnett, ed. (Victor Gollancz/VGSF, 14 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8QJ UK, trade paper, 267pp, £4.99)

This is not so much a review as a notice: *New Worlds* is back, not as a magazine, but as an anthology. The fact that you are reading this magazine suggests you have some interest in short fiction, and that being the case I thought you'd want to know. Many of you will remember that back in the 1960s, *New Worlds* was the journal of the New Wave. You remember the New Wave — it really was what Cyberpunk only wished to be, a complete rethinking and reinvention of science fiction, even as the traditional modes continued to co-exist, however uneasily, with the dangerous new stuff. Many of us know the New Wave only in its American translation: Harlan Ellison's *Dangerous Visions* anthologies.

In reviving an expired radical magazine there is a real danger that the result will be, not radical, but nostalgic, and certainly the introductory material is full of self-congratulation and griping about how people didn't live up to their old vision. A bit of the attitude that with *this* anthology, they'll get people Back On Track. One remembers 94-year-old Communists demanding that these careless youngsters stick with the Revolution.

Still, the fiction I have read to this point usually transcends the ain't-we-cool editorial tone. The literary tricks are, as to be expected, the same old tricks that have long since lost their trickiness. But the stories are powerful, if you can see through the ideological haze well enough to find them. Obviously Garnett has lost nothing of his touch as a perceptive editor, and the book is well worth buying.

It's also fun to see reprinted near the end of the book a copy of Gollancz's letter of rejection for Garnett's own first novel, later published in the U.S. Much of the irony is, of course, that Gollancz is the publisher of the present volume. The fact of reprinting the letter can speak equally with ease of present smugness and of old pain that will not die however much it might fade. In some ways it is a summary of the book.

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Mark W. Tiedemann has sold stories to Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Universe II, *and several anthologies. His story "Shattered Template," appeared in our June, 1992 issue. He has finished two novels. Often science fiction takes a larger-than-life view of changes that may occur in the future when some of the most vast changes could occur in "ordinary" circumstances. "The Playground Door" addresses a vast change — and its effect on one family.*

The Playground Door

By Mark W. Tiedemann

PAUL KEPT HIS hands folded neatly on his lap. He glanced down at his son beside him. Jonathan, four years old, imitated Paul, his small face set in a precious mask of seriousness. His legs dangled from the edge of the plastic chair. On the other side of Jonathan, Kay sat less formally, as if the bulk of her pregnancy would permit no straight back, no properness of posture, no dignity of occasion other than its own blatant claim on attention. Kay was proud but tired. Paul had already decided that there probably would be no more children. Kay was small, delicate, too important to him to risk. He made a mental note to discuss it with her later, probably after this one was born.

The room was too cold. Paul wondered if he were being too critical; he had designed this building, and somehow it failed to meet his approval. The decor was stark. Plastic furniture, off-white and pale-blue walls,

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darker-blue carpet that absorbed sound. No one else was present. The last people had left twenty minutes ago. The fragile sounds of sobbing from one of them had not entirely been snatched away before Paul heard them. He hoped none of his family would weep.

Across from where they sat, the double doors swung inward, and Paul's heart struck hard once, twice, then calmed to normal as his father entered.

Eric Dover was a large, robust man with thick auburn hair that was going white at the sides and a confident smile Paul could never remember being absent. At fifty-two the man was in better shape than anyone else Paul knew, including himself. He walked with a long stride, arms slightly akimbo as if he were constantly ready to embrace. When he saw Paul, his small blue eyes danced, and he grinned.

He wore jogging pants and a T-shirt. He looked supremely happy.

For a widower, Paul thought grimly, and stood.

Paul extended a hand. His father took it briefly, puzzled, then laughed and pulled Paul into a hug. Paul endured in what he hoped was dignity until Eric let him go with a laugh.

Kay had gotten to her feet and eagerly accepted a less hearty hug from her father-in-law. Paul saw her eyes glistening and hoped she would not start crying.

Jonathan stood looking up with a grim face at the big man he called "Gra'pa."

"Well, now," Eric said, regarding his grandson. "Why the long face? You keep that up, you'll be just like your dad! You're too young to be serious all the time." He squatted down so he was eye level with the boy. "Do I get a hug from you?"

Jonathan stepped forward and reverently wrapped his small arms around Eric's neck. The solemnity the child gave to the act nearly erased the smile from Eric's face. Paul watched the tiny ritual with a sense of pride in his son that mitigated some of the absurdity Eric brought to the occasion. For an instant, Eric's face changed. Paul thought he saw a tear form, the mouth curve down slightly, and perhaps a moment of regret suffused the man's entire presence. Paul blinked, startled, and then Eric was hugging Jonathan and lifting him off the floor.

"God, you're getting big!"

The illusion vanished, and Paul was left with an aftertaste of something exotic. His father almost — almost — took something seriously.

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"I appreciate you coming," Eric said, setting Jonathan down, "I wouldn't want to do this without seeing you all one last time."

"You'll see us again," Kay said.

"Sure, but not like this. Hell, you'll both be my age when I wake up."

"Dad —"

Eric shook his head. "Don't. We've already discussed it."

Paul felt his mouth tighten. "But you're not even sick," he blurted doggedly.

Eric's eyebrows went up. "I'm sick of this age, Son. The world is dreary."

"Who says it'll be any better in thirty years?"

Eric shrugged. "Maybe it won't. But it'll be different." He shook his head. "I've made my decision."

Paul glanced at Kay, then at Jonathan. No, this was not the time to have it out. Not in front of Jonathan, not here in the wating room of the cryotorium, not when everything was about to happen, not when Eric had set his sights on what he wanted —

It was never a good time to have it out. What would be the point in any case? Eric always won.

Paul shrugged. "There's time later."

Eric nodded, but seemed uncertain for a moment. Paul studied the narrowing of eyes, the slight downward jerk of the brow, the hesitant set of the mouth — only a moment, then it was gone. Eric only gave him such moments to think about and wonder if his father was in fact human. Doubt was something Eric did not maintain for long.

"We can talk about it in thirty years," he said, and laughed.

"Why thirty years?" Kay asked.

"Why not?" Eric answered. "Actually, that's what they recommended. For some reason, thirty is a breakpoint. After that, it goes up to fifty, then to a hundred, I didn't understand it. Twenty didn't seem long enough. . . ." He laughed again. "That left thirty."

Paul looked toward the windows. Through the vertical blinds, he saw the pleasant parkland thick with evergreens that surounded the cryotorium. It had rained earlier, and the green seemed aglow, a latent vitality just on the surface of everything, unspoiled by choices. Paul thought of Jonathan that way — Jonathan had not made any mistakes yet, had taken no wrong turns; everything good was still implicit in the child, frozen at a perfect moment. Paul wished he could keep it this way. Paul envied his son.

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"Well," Eric said, "you've got the house for the next thirty years. If you're in doubt about anything, just check the file labeled 'Disposition' or ask my lawyer."

He nodded, looked back at his father, and said, "You can depend on me."

Eric patted Paul's shoulder. "I know."

And for another instant, they locked eyes. Paul sensed the importance of the moment, the latent vitality rising out of Eric like a sphere of light to envelop him, drawing him into the significance of however Eric saw the moment. I should say something, Paul thought, and a long list of things scrolled through his mind that he wanted to say to his father. "I love you" was somewhere in the middle, and before he got to that particular line, the bubble dissipated, the instant ended, and Eric smiled grimly and looked away.

Then he was hugging Kay and roughing Jonathan's hair, laughing once more.

"See you in thirty years," he said loudly, and walked away.

Paul watched him depart, and felt his lips part, his tongue moving in the silent shaping of final words, unvoiced. Eric was through the doors; Paul felt his body jerk, as if a line had been attached to him and suddenly yanked free, and he took a single step forward.

"Let's go home," Kay said.

They drove to the house in silence. Paul felt Kay's emotions like rising humidity, but he did not want to say anything to color the day with an inappropriate shade.

The house sprawled lazily up the side of a low hill. It was the product of years of his father's effort. That and Paul's uncle, Nathan. Paul remembered playing in the half-finished rooms, in the basement before the floor covered it, along the stretches of planks open to the sky. The place was self-sufficient for months; Eric had installed four big freezers in the basement and had stocked them with food and perishables. It had grown year by year until Paul's mother's death. That had been the only time Paul remembered seeing his father somber. For all of three or four months, Eric had not smiled, laughed, made a joke, or allowed anyone to lift his spirits. As Paul thought about it now, it seemed as though the man had concentrated all his grief into as short a time as possible, lived with it

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intimately, cloistered it and cultivated it and paid attention to nothing else until it was all used up.

Not long afterward, Eric was seeing other women. Through his outrage, Paul had been unable to detect a significant difference in his father from the time before his mother had died to the time of this man who could not seem to sustain proper regret. He was the same man — and Paul had hated him for that. Perhaps if he had shown a change, acted differently toward life, his friends, his son, then Paul might have accepted his actions. But Eric was the same.

Perhaps not, Paul thought now, but he would never know. By the time his anger had passed, he discovered that he could not know if Eric was simply showing the world a face and keeping everything in, or if he was different, and Paul had not known him well enough before. Paul had been fourteen when his mother died. Cancer, he thought, but he did not know because Eric had kept that from him. One day, he noticed that his mother was sick a lot. Shortly thereafter, she left to go to a clinic. A few months later was the funeral. All through that time, everything possessed a surreal aura, like light shot through glycerin. People moved more slowly; grief seemed a tangible thing; moments became encased in amber, and he remembered them long afterward as still lifes.

I'll have to wait thirty years now to ask, he thought. Maybe by then I'll be able to.

"Why are we going to Gra'pa's house?"

Paul started, glanced at Jonathan, who was straining to see over the top of the front seat.

"We live there now, Jon," Kay said.

"Why?"

"Grampa asked us to take care of it. It's easier to do that if we live there."

"We're going to live there till he comes back?"

"Perhaps." She smiled over her shoulder. "You like Grampa's house, don't you? You don't mind living there?"

Jonathan nodded, but he looked uncertain.

Paul pulled into the garage. He got out of the car and opened Kay's door. She smiled at him as he helped her out. Jonathan jumped from the rear seat and looked back down the driveway.

"Come on, Jonathan," Paul called.

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The boy remained motionless. Paul and Kay exchanged quizzical looks, silently asking each other if this was something important that needed attention, or just Jonathan being Jonathan.

"Jon," Kay called.

The boy turned. He looked like he had a question, but did not know how to phrase it. Perhaps, Paul thought, he wonders why we have to go through all this nonsense for an eccentric old man.

"Let's get some lunch, Son."

Jonathan nodded, took another look down the driveway, then followed his parents into the house.

PAUL HAD been in his bedroom most of an hour when Kay came in. He sat on his bed — *his* bed, in *his* room, which was smaller than Eric's — and watched her move ponderously through the process of undressing. Paul was fascinated by her, especially now. Her breasts were swollen, the nipples large and dark, resting on the enormous mound of her pregnancy. Everything else about her appeared normal. Paul admired her legs. She pulled a nightgown on, sat on the end of the bed, and brushed her hair for a few minutes.

"I thought," she began, then shook her head.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"No, something. Tell me."

She stood, set the brush on the dresser. "I thought we'd be in the main bedroom."

"That's Eric's."

Kay gave him a quizzical look, then shrugged.

"You disagree?" he pressed.

"Is it going to be his for the next thirty years? Everything?"

"It is, though."

"Then we ought to move back to our house. I don't think I want to feel like a guest here for thirty years."

"But we've put ours on the market."

"No one has bought it yet; we'll just withdraw it."

"I thought you wanted to live here."

She nodded, eased herself into bed. "Yes, I want to live here. I don't want to just stay here."

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"This is Eric's house."

"And he's given it to us."

"No, he hasn't. He's asked us to take care of it."

Kay studied him narrowly. She let her hand brush his arm lightly. "Hon, we can't pretend that we're just watching this place for him. In the first place, he told us that it's our home if we want it. In the second place, we've got to get on with our lives, and if we stay here, we have to live here; otherwise, we'll be putting everything on hold, waiting for your father to return."

"What's wrong with that?"

"If he were on a European tour for six months, nothing. But three decades is a little long for us to wait for him to come back before we decide who we are."

Paul blinked at her. "That didn't make any sense."

"No? O.K. I'm tired. I need sleep."

Paul watched her close her eyes and lie silent. For a moment, he was dismayed. Then he felt angry. She manages, he thought, to stir up a lot of uncomfortable, unpleasant feelings, and then has the gall to go to sleep before anything is resolved.

They had been to counseling a few years earlier. Paul had thought little enough of it all — nothing for him had been solved — but he remembered some of the rules the counselor laid down. Never go to bed with an argument unfinished. There had been times he had wished he had known that with Eric. He glanced around at the walls of his room, and rifled through the jumbled memories of the many times he had lain there fuming because Eric had sent him to bed in the middle of an argument. He glared at Kay.

"You and Eric are a lot alike," he said.

Her eyes snapped open. "I think I'm prettier."

The joke struck him wrong, and he got out of bed.

"Hey," she said. "That was supposed to be funny."

"What the hell did you mean by that? Not waiting for him to come back before deciding who we are. What does that mean?"

"Ah. I struck a nerve."

She pushed herself upright and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. She sighed, stood, and pulled on a robe.

"O.K.," she said. "Let's go into the kitchen. If we're going to fight, I'm

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going to munch."

Paul bristled. Of all the things Eric did continually that irritated, annoyed, and enraged him, Eric's apparent refusal to take arguments seriously worked Paul into inexpressible states. Mute, he followed his wife to the kitchen.

Kay found a vegetable platter in the refrigerator, set it on the island, and plucked a celery stick from it.

Paul folded his arms and glared at her.

"I start?" she said. She nodded. "I start. Paul, I love you. That doesn't change. I wouldn't be here if I didn't. I wouldn't be carrying our second child. I wouldn't be trying to make this work if I didn't. But sometimes you can be the most perverse son of a bitch I've ever known."

Paul felt physically rocked. He dropped his arms and stared at her. She bit off half the celery stick.

"Eric is easy to understand," she went on. "He's self-indulgent and egotistic."

"I suppose you'd be happier with someone like that?"

"No. Otherwise, I would have found someone like that. But when you say I'm a lot like him, I'm torn about how to take it. You admire your father almost to the point of elevating him to godhood, but you use him as an example of everything you don't like in other people."

"Oh. So you think I want to be like him."

"I didn't say that. And no, I don't. You *don't* want to be like him. The trouble is, you're so goddamned busy *not* being like him that you're not bothering to be like anything else, either."

Paul raised his hand, finger pointed, and opened his mouth. A dozen things crowded his mind, demanding expression. He could not decide which was most important, so none of them was said. He turned away.

"I like your father," Kay said. "I think he's a wonderful grandfather to Jon —"

"Jonathan," Paul corrected automatically. He hated nicknames; his own had been Kite.

"Jon."

He glared at her.

"He's a little boy," she said. "Don't load all this generational-guilt crap on him. He's not the standard you could never be."

"Excuse me?"

Kay threw up a hand in disgust and rolled her eyes. "You want to live

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up to Eric's expectations — what *you* think those are, at any rate — and you don't think you can. So you'll make sure our son does. Stop it. He's his own self."

"I know that! He's my son; I love him!"

"So love him."

"I do! I take my responsibilities toward him very seriously!"

Kay nodded. "Unlike your father?"

"Unlike my father! Yes! Eric never takes *anything* seriously!"

"Especially you?"

"I don't know about 'especially,' but he never took me seriously."

"You're wrong."

"Oh? This is something you know by virtue of some special insight? Eric perhaps explained this to you? That'd be like him to explain to you what he'd never think to mention to me."

Kay raised an eyebrow. "You better watch that, or you'll have a neurosis before you know it."

Paul slammed both fists down on the counter. The vegetable platter jumped noisily, but nothing spilled. Pain shot up his forearms. When he looked at Kay, it was a broken, hazy image, with his eyes filled with tears. Frustration encysted him. He turned around and looked at the walls, the windows, out at the autumn darkness.

"Why couldn't he just . . . die? Like a normal human being? Why couldn't he just go away and never come back? I can't even ask him that for thirty years."

Kay came around the island and hugged him from behind. At first, he resented the gesture, almost winced at the attempted comfort. His misery was his own in a way that nothing else had ever been. But it was a pathetic property, and Kay's comfort embarrassed him. He turned and held her.

Jonathan stood in the doorway of the kitchen, watching them, his small face still and solemn. Paul frowned.

"Jonathan . . .?"

"Don't you want Gra'pa to come back?"

Paul stiffened. Jonathan waited for an answer, eyes liquid and hurt, confusion demanding resolution. Paul looked at Kay, and she watched him, waiting.

"He asked you," she whispered.

Paul shook his head.

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The boy ran away.

Kay said no more about it, but methodically moved them into Eric's bedroom. Paul watched, fascinated, while she reordered their lives with a quiet efficiency and confidence that in anyone else would have made him feel inadequate.

Sleeping in that bed was more difficult. Paul would lay awake for an hour before drifting off, his attention riveted to every sound that broke the night's quiet. He lay with his hands folded over his chest, his legs straight, almost rigid, and in the morning, it appeared he had hardly moved at all. He did not remember his dreams.

After a few weeks, he resumed work. Eric's office was equipped with a better computer system than he had, and it was easy to shift all his databases and projects into the expanded system. He immersed himself in designs again.

The intricacy of architecture fascinated Paul. He lost himself in the complexities, the problem solving, the piece-by-piece creation of a solution. He worked best alone rather than as part of a team. He was always disturbed by what others did to his work, even when he approved the modifications. He entered into relationships with his designs; they were part of him. Here, before his computer-augmented drafting board, amid all the programs, reference materials, and sketches, he felt himself most complete. It was completion by negation, though, for he was not conscious of "Paul" while he worked — he *was* the work. Kay pointed this out once, but he did not understand. He knew only that he had no self-doubt when he worked.

"Besides," he had said, "I feel the same making love with you."

He looked at his children the same way, though he insisted the affection he held toward the one was qualitatively different from the other. He collected books and databases about fetal development, post-natal care, early-childhood progress, and he read them all. Kay had chided him on what appeared a heroic attempt to make himself into a pediatrician. Nevertheless, it fascinated him. Jonathan was a growing, changing self-repairing, self-improving, adapting, living structure.

When Kay had been pregnant with Jonathan, Paul had designed a school. Now he was working on a day care, a commission he had wanted to get ever since.

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Occasionally Jonathan came into the study to watch him or quietly play nearby. The child seemed to know not to interrupt Paul when he worked. Paul enjoyed his son's presence, though, and found it pleasant to glance over to see the boy playing in some other part of the room. He sometimes wistfully wished Jonathan *would* interrupt him, with questions or requests, child's concerns, laughter. Uncomfortably, Paul caught himself once in a while wishing Jonathan would hurt himself so that Paul could minister to the wound and be more *necessary* to Jonathan, a benefactor, a Father. He played scenarios out in his head, imagining an injury or crisis, constructing his own responses, knowing the outcome would be a father and son drawn closer together by the trauma.

He impatiently dismissed these daydreams with a stern reminder to himself that he wished only the best for Jonathan, and he certainly never wanted the boy hurt. At such times, though, he watched his son and —dimly — realized that he did not really understand the child. Someday he would. Time would draw them together; proximity would forge its own intimacy.

Will I be closer to Eric in thirty years . . .?

"Daddy . . .?"

"Hmmm?"

"How long's Gra'pa going to sleep?"

"Thirty years."

"He'll be alive afterward?"

"Of course. He's just frozen."

"I'll be a grown-up when he wakes up."

"Uh-huh. Thirty-four. A man."

"Will he still be my gra'pa?"

"Of course. Time can't change that. Though you might call him 'Grandfather' instead."

"You call him Eric. Can I?"

"If he says you can."

"Will he still take me places?"

"What? You mean like Disney World, like last year? Well, you probably won't want to then. You'll be an adult, with adult interests."

Jonathan digested this with a serious expression. Paul watched him absently, Paul's mind on a problem of entrances and exits in the design on his board. Finally Jonathan shrugged, hugged Paul briefly, and went off to

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play somewhere else.

I'm glad we can talk, Paul thought, returning to his design.

FIVE WEEKS after Eric went to sleep, Kay went into labor. They hurried to the local clinic, and six hours later Michael came into the world.

The next day, Paul was allowed to bring Jonathan into Kay's room. She looked tired and a little pale. The labor had gone well, not as hard on her as Paul had feared, but he was still struck by how fragile she looked. No more, he thought; Michael is the last.

"We could have done this at home," Kay said. "It wasn't so bad."

"I feel safer about it here," Paul said. "Anything goes wrong. . . ."

"Next one, I want to have at home."

Paul frowned. Kay's eyes closed sleepily.

"Is Mommy going to sleep for thirty years?" Jonathan asked, his voice small and a little tremulous.

Paul shot him a stark look. Kay stared at him, grinning.

"No, honey," she said. "I'll be home in a day or two."

Jonathan looked very serious, then nodded and looked up at Paul. Paul's heart hammered. He could not read the question in Jonathan's eyes, nor could he seem to speak.

"My brother," Jonathan said, "won't know anything about Gra'pa, will he?"

"Not unless we tell him," Kay said. She sounded so tired.

"Maybe we better not."

Paul licked his lips. "Why not?"

Jonathan shrugged. "It wouldn't be fair. He'd miss Gra'pa and not even know who he is."

"My, my," Kay said dryly, "we have a natural-born philosopher in our family." She smiled thinly at Paul.

"It's not funny," Paul said. "Jonathan, your grandfather hasn't got anything to do with this. Understand?"

Jonathan kept his gaze down.

"Paul," Kay say, "I don't think this is the time —"

"Then when is? That selfish son of a bitch, even on *ice*, he's controlling my life, interfering with my family." He touched Jonathan's shoulder. The boy looked up. "Try to forget about him, Jonathan. You can ask him in

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thirty years why he decided to duck out of our lives, but for now, he's just not part of anything."

"Paul!"

Jonathan nodded slowly. "I just won't say anything to my brother."

Paul completed the initial floor plans for the day care and faxed them off to the client.

Kay was in the living room, cradling Michael against her shoulder and looking out the window. Paul smiled at them. He felt, for the first time in a long while, satisfied. He paused for a few seconds to enjoy the moment, the gestalt of family. Then he stepped in, opening his mouth to tell her about the completed designs and how he felt —

Kay looked at him. "Have you seen Jon today?"

Paul stopped. "No. I've been working."

She nodded. "I haven't seen him in a few hours."

"Did he go outside? It's warm enough."

"I don't see him. I told him not to go into the woods out of sight of the house."

"I'll go find him."

He went outside and called. After half an hour, he began to feel uneasy. He checked Jonathan's room. The small bed was made, as if it had not been slept in. Jonathan was a conscientious boy, Paul told himself; he had been making his own bed for several months now, though not this well. Paul asked Kay if she had made the bed.

"No. It wasn't messed up this morning when I checked."

Paul went through the house, room by room, calling his son. With each no response, his ill ease grew less and less dismissible. By the afternoon, it was clear that Jonathan was not anywhere in the house.

Kay called the police.

Paul tried to find some trail outside to indicate that Jonathan might have wandered away, or perhaps someone had come up to the house undetected. That was unlikely, but Paul found himself snatching at any possibility. His well-ordered sense of the world was losing its capacity to cope, and he did not know how to handle panic.

The police arrived, took statements, a couple of photographs; a pair of dogs were ordered. Paul watched with intense impatience as the police checked Jonathan's room, the rest of the house, clearly, to Paul's mind,

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unconcerned. They moved much too slowly, did things with far too little sense of importance, and all their reassurances sounded hollow.

Michael began to cry incessantly.

By the time the search dogs arrived, Paul realized that he was useless in his current state of mind.

"I'll be in my office," he said to Kay. "I have to —"

She nodded, giving him a gentle shove.

"I'll help them," she said.

Gratefully, Paul retreated to his workplace.

The fax finished spitting something out as he entered. A response already? he thought. That would be quick. He went to the machine and tore off the paper.

"Dear Mr. Dover: We have gone over your floor plans with great enthusiasm. At a glance, they appear perfect for our needs. Wonderful. Exactly what we wanted. However, there is one detail that must surely be a mistake. The outdoor play area is fine; however, there does not seem to be any direct access to it from the interior. We're quite sure this is an oversight. Please advise. We wait your response."

Paul reread it six times. He booted up the floor plans and traced all the doors. There was no door to the playground. The nearest access from inside the building was the fire escape.

A deep, percussive laugh worked its way up through Paul's larynx. It was a silly, obvious mistake. He sat down.

The door opened. Kay stared at him with wide eyes. Paul shrugged, realizing how silly and insensitive he must seem, but when he told her why, she would understand. A laugh in the midst of all this tension could hurt nothing. He held up the fax and opened his mouth.

A policeman appeared behind Kay.

"Mr. Dover," he said quietly. "We've located your son."

Kay chewed her lower lip.

"Great!" Paul said, standing.

"Would you come with us, sir."

Paul frowned. Kay was not smiling. She held Michael, who complained with small, uncertain sounds. Paul walked by her and followed the officer.

They did not go outside. Baffled, Paul followed the man into the basement. Paul wanted to tell him that he had already looked down here, that he knew this house very well, and Jonathan could not have hidden

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from him within it. After all, he had grown up here, played in these halls and rooms, explored everything even as it was being built.

The dogs snuffled at the ends of their leashes. Faces in harsh light turned to look at him as he followed the policeman. It was chilly in the basement. The floor was tiled; the walls were off-white. For an instant, it reminded him of the cryotorium. Paul had always been happiest playing in the basement. They parted for him.

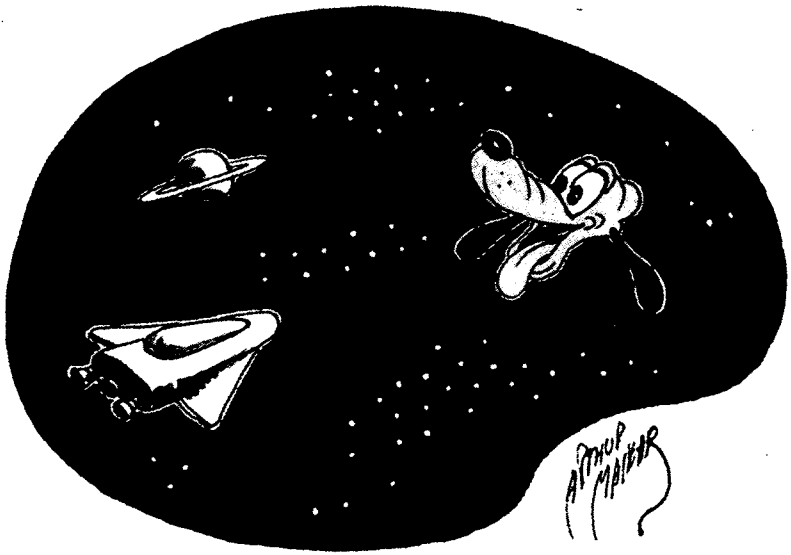
"The paramedics are on their way," someone said.

He stopped at the side of one of the big chest freezers.

Jonathan lay within, eyes closed, hands folded across his small chest, the ice crystals glinting on his eyelashes, frosting his hair. His skin was a perfect expression of calm and patience, pale blue, though his eyes were rimmed with dark circles. A small suitcase lay beside him, and at his feet was a plastic bag containing some of his favorite toys.

"He's all ready," Paul said quietly, "For when Gra'pa comes home. He's. . . ."

He could not help but think what a precious mask of seriousness Jonathan wore.



"Yes, ground control, I can see Pluto, but . . ."

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"Janell Johannson's First Exhibit" is Joyce K. Jensen's first fantasy sale and her first sale to F&SF. Her stories have also sold to Aboriginal SF, *and* Amazing Stories. *About the story, Joyce writes, "The 1950s didn't hold much by way of possibilities for girls and women, so, although this story is about possibilities, it didn't start out that way. It started out as a story about how society crushes hope, squashes ambition, and works to keep people in their place. But when Janell took over, she wouldn't have any of it. 1954 or not, she wanted those possibilities. ..."*

Janell Johannson's First Exhibit

By Joyce K. Jensen

"MISS GERARD, what does the word 'sputnik' mean?"

"I don't know, Janell. Where did you hear it?"

Before Janell could explain that she had noticed a drawing of it in the dictionary at the back of the room, Miss Gerard was distracted by another question. She had a big classroom, thirty-one children in three grades, and it was a challenge to keep them all learning.

"Children," she said, "today everyone is to draw a picture of Jesus praying in Gethsemane. Whoever does the best picture as judged by Miss Ryborg will get to do a poster for Family Night next Thursday." Miss Ryborg, the church organist, had refined taste in all the arts. "Start thinking about it. I'll hand out paper in a few minutes."

Janell greeted news of the drawing with enthusiasm, the first she had felt

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in some time. In fact, if anyone had thought to ask her whether or not she liked school, she would have said, "How could you not like school? School is where you do the most interesting things in the world." So her discouragement wasn't from boredom or because of the conformity required of schoolchildren in 1954. It was, ironically, because of her own passion for the work.

While the other kids rolled spitballs and played tick-tack-toe behind their history books, Janell paged through *The Standard American Encyclopedia* (especially Vol. X, with the 12-page section on Q words). When most of the fourth grade skipped over the new words in *Reading Wonders*, she puzzled them out phonetically, then carried them on the tip of her tongue like shimmery blown-glass bubbles to the big dictionary at the back of the room, where their inner beauty was revealed.

As Miss Gerard began passing out arithmetic tests to the fifth graders, Janell went back to the dusty red dictionary and found "sputnik" again. "Sputnik" was a space satellite, so she decorated her spelling paper (she always decorated her papers) with rocket ships like the ones on the covers of the magazines her oldest brother read.

Every morning she and her three brothers walked to Grace Lutheran School, a two-story building that squatted between a dusty playground and the church parking lot. The school had a musty, chalky smell; on rainy days it was permeated by the pleasant odor of damp wood. Its bricks had darkened with age, the wooden floors were worn and dull, the window glass as ripply as the surface of a pond.

Janell first tasted discouragement in the second grade, when she realized that the teacher, Miss Anderson, never called on her. Janell was proud of having the answers, even a little smug about it. But no matter how fast or how often her hand fluttered above the heads of her classmates, who might be gazing out the window daydreaming or passing notes or doodling in the margins of their workbooks, Miss Anderson called on someone else.

Janell worked out ploys for getting called on, like shooting her hand straight up and keeping her arm as rigid as a flagpole, the fingers pointing at the ceiling. She tried fluttering her fingers, moving her hand in circles, and drawing *X*'s in the air. Try as she might, she couldn't will her arm to stay down. It shot up ten times a day, but mostly she lowered it with a pang of disappointment.

The next year Miss Mueller, the new first-, second- and third-grade teacher, never called on her either. It finally occurred to Janell that perhaps the

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teachers didn't like her. Since she got *A*'s in everything except penmanship, that could be the only possible cause. There was nothing more laborious than forming an entire row of *O*'s followed by a whole page of *C*'s and *G*'s with a pencil that was as dull as the work. She often quit halfway through and concentrated on drawing a decorative border instead. Finally, however, she asked her mother to buy a penmanship tablet, then sat at the dining room table every night for weeks drawing rows of *K*'s and *R*'s and *L*'s, but especially *J*'s, between the blue lines. *J*, the most graceful of all the letters, and the most difficult to draw. Every night she filled a page with *Janell Janet Johannson.*

"Why, Janell," her mother exclaimed at the end of the fall term, "straight *A*'s again and a gold star for penmanship!" But still the teacher didn't call on her.

By the fourth grade, Janell was feeling defeat. How could she become a teacher, which was her heart's desire, if the teacher never called on her? How would they know that she *knew* enough to be a teacher? Though Janell still dutifully carried her homework upstairs to her room after dinner every night, she started rereading Walter Farley books instead of working.

Miss Gerard, who taught the fourth, fifth and sixth grades, began to scribble remarks on her papers: "I was disappointed that you didn't study harder," or "I know your spelling is better than this." But it wasn't enough to get her going again. Even gold and silver stars weren't sufficient. Miss Gerard was a great believer in the foil stars, and Janell pelled them off her papers and kept them in a paper-clip box against some future need. Though her hand still floated upward several times a day, the animation had gone out of it. She began to live for recess.

The playground, which had been trampled by decades of Buster Browns, supported not a tree, bush nor blade of grass. It was the first recess of the year that was actually warm enough to enjoy outdoors. But Miss Gerard, who wasn't hopping, jumping, climbing, swinging, running, tagging, throwing or catching, sat shivering in a thin sweater in the thinner sunlight. Sensing an opportunity, Janell moved away from the jump rope and stood at the end of the bench, pretending to be out of breath. "I guess you really like teaching, don't you, Miss Gerard?" she said.

"For what they're paying me, I must." Miss Gerard patted the bench beside her. "Sit down. Actually I'm just teaching until I have enough money to finish college."

Since Janell and most of her friends planned to be teachers when they grew

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up, Janell was taken aback. She sat down, then sidled close enough to brush Miss Gerard's arm. She inhaled deeply of Miss Gerard's eau de toilette and admired Miss Gerard's clothes, which weren't homemade.

"Teaching is O.K.," Miss Gerard continued. "But I want to travel. See the world and all that."

"Miss Gerard," Janell asked suddenly, "were you a good student?"

"Hmm. O.K., I guess."

"What does someone have to do to be a good student?"

Miss Gerard was scanning the playground for dangerous behavior. "You're a good student."

"Then why don't you ever call on me?"

"Why, because you already know the answers. I have to call on the children who don't."

Janell was stunned. The idea had never occurred to her, but the implications were immediately obvious. Apparently you should only raise your hand if you didn't know the answer and if you knew the answer, you shouldn't raise your hand. Then you might be called on.

Janell tried not raising her hand for the rest of the afternoon until it dawned on her that it wouldn't work. Miss Gerard already knew that she knew the answers.

MISS GERARD, why do they call it Skylab?"

"My goodness, where do you come up with these words?"

"I found it in the dictionary."

"Let's go find it again, then."

They went to the back of the room, where the big dictionary lay open on top of the low bookshelf. "I don't see it, dear," Miss Gerard said. "Mickey dropped the dictionary this morning. Maybe some of the words fell out."

Janell chuckled dutifully at Miss Gerard's joke, said thank you and went back to her desk. It was a good thing she'd copied the picture of Skylab before the word disappeared.

Children who weren't being taught were supposed to do homework or work on a craft project, for no season was without one. These ranged from Mother's and Father's Day cards through Japanese lanterns, paper chains, silhouettes and coverings for shoe boxes and coffee cans. There were paper bouquets, manger scenes, valentines, turkeys, Pilgrims, shamrocks and Easter eggs that came with the season, whatever that season might be. Forty-eight

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Crayola crayons were an absolute necessity at Grace Lutheran.

With Easter a few weeks off, the children had already cut, pasted, colored and stapled construction-paper eggs, bunnies, baskets, crosses, angels, tulips and lilies. That afternoon Miss Gerard announced the poster contest.

She tacked up a blurry color reproduction of the Savior kneeling by a great rock, palms pressed together, anguished face raised heavenward in supplication while bloody drops of sweat glistened on his forehead. In the background, asleep, were the careless disciples. While Miss Gerard dictated spelling words to the sixth graders, the other kids got to work. She collected the pictures at the end of the day.

The next morning Janell woke up with a fever. She hadn't missed a day of school since kindergarten, when her mother had been hounded to exhaustion by a family-wide mumps epidemic. But this time she wasn't pronounced fit until Tuesday morning.

Overjoyed, Janell ran the whole seven blocks.

Miss Gerard, where is Cape Canaveral?"

Miss Gerard smiled and patted her on the head. "More words that fell out of the dictionary, I suppose. I'm glad you're better. You won the poster contest and you'll need to get right to work. It has to be done by Family Night on Thursday. By the way, what's this thing in the corner of your drawing?"

Janell started to say "Skylab," but Miss Gerard might think she was making it up, like she thought Janell had made up the other words. So she said, "Something I saw in a book."

Janell was surprised — but not too surprised — that her drawing had won. With plenty of time to finish before Thursday, she saved drawing the actual picture for last and began by designing a border of stars, moons and planets. She measured points one inch from the edge all around and pasted on her hoard of foil stars. Finally she wrote "Jesus Praying in Gethsemane" at the top; modestly, in letters half as tall, she added "By Janell Janet Johannson," beautifying the *J*'s. Then she added, "For Miss Gerard."

Wednesday she woke up with a slight — a very slight — fever, so her mother kept her home again. All day Janell thought of nothing but the poster, and came up with the wonderful idea of drawing blood dripping down Jesus' cheeks and splashing on the rock. But her careless brothers forgot to bring the poster home with them; Mom didn't even get mad.

The next morning Janell couldn't find the poster, and the teachers were

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having a meeting and couldn't be disturbed. When Miss Gerard came into the classroom just before the bell rang, Janell hurried up to the front. "I couldn't find the poster, Miss Gerard," she said. "I have to finish it for tonight."

"Oh, I'm sorry, dear. I wasn't sure you'd be back today so I asked Betty Ann to do one instead."

Shock and betrayal washed over Janell. She was certain that she had missed her chance and no one would ever pay attention to her again, if she raised her hand for the rest of her life. Unable to stop the tears, she ran downstairs to the girls' room, Miss Gerard at her heels.

She sat in the nurse's office until she calmed down (the visiting nurse only came once a month, but Mr. Wilhelm's secretary looked in on her every five minutes). Then she returned to the classroom, kicking herself inside. If only she had drawn Jesus first. If only she hadn't spent all that time pasting on the stars. If only she hadn't made so many curlicues spiraling off the J's. She looked at the poster, which Miss Gerard had put in the supply cabinet for safekeeping. Finishing it seemed pointless now. Janell turned it toward the wall.

At supper she wasn't hungry. "I think I'm sick again," she said, making her voice as weak and trembly as possible. But her temperature remained stubbornly normal. There was no getting out of Family Night.

On the bulletin board in the hall for all the parents to see was Betty Ann's poster, surrounded by construction-paper eggs, baskets, crosses, bunnies, angels, tulips and lilies. "What a lovely poster," her mother said.

Janell made a face, wondering why her mother didn't notice the flaws. They were so obvious. Jesus' eyes were crooked, as if there had been an earthquake in the region of his nose and one side of his face had shifted. The rock looked like a marshmallow. And Betty Ann had completely forgotten to draw the sleeping disciples in the background — an omission every bit as careless as the careless disciples themselves!

Miss Gerard told Mr. and Mrs. Johannson, "Janell is my best student," but Janell refused to look at her. "She decorates all her papers beautifully. I think you should consider getting art lessons for her."

When Janell finally understood that Miss Gerard wasn't going to tell her parents how badly she'd behaved this morning, she exhaled a sigh of relief. At that moment she noticed that her poster had been tacked up on the classroom bulletin board where the neatest homework was displayed. In the center someone had pasted her drawing of Jesus, the little one that won the contest.

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Skylab flew jauntily overhead.

At first Janell was afraid that everyone would know Miss Gerard had put it there because she had cried that morning, but no one said anything. The drawing looked lost in the middle of such a big poster, and Janell thought that blood on the rock would have been a significant improvement. But someone had pasted extra silver and gold stars between the outline and the drawing to fill in the empty space; a person could almost imagine it had been planned that way.

Finally everybody trooped upstairs for cookies and Kool-Aid. Mr. Wilhelm said, "Good evening ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls. Education is the 'open sesame' to success." It was the same thing he always said, pronouncing "sesame" SEE-same. The microphone screeched horribly, interrupting his speech several times.

Afterward Miss Gerard sat down by Janell, who secretly studied her make-up so she would know how to wear it herself when she grew up. Mr. Wilhelm began turning off the lights.

"I wanted to let you know that I won't be coming back next fall," Miss Gerard told her.

"Oh. Who are you getting married to?" All of Janell's teachers quit to get married after a year or two.

"No one. I saved up enough money to go to art school in New York."

Janell looked at her again. New York seemed like a frighteningly heathen place, and very far away. "There are lots of museums in New York," Miss Gerard said. "And galleries. I bet you'll go there someday, too."

Janell started to say, "I'm going to be a teacher, like you," only Miss Gerard wasn't going to be a teacher anymore.

Miss Gerard said good night and walked toward the stairs. "Follow your dreams, Janell," she said over her shoulder. "The sky's the limit. Don't forget your poster!"

Janell watched her go, then skipped down the stairs herself, where her parents and brothers were waiting. She ran into the classroom and pulled the thumbtacks out of her poster, dropping one, which rolled under the bookcase.

She got down on her hands and knees and found the tack under the shelf with the dust bunnies. There was something else, too — a neat little scrap of paper about the size of the fortunes in fortune cookies. Janell picked it up. It was the definition of "sputnik" from the dictionary, neatly printed as if it really had fallen off the page. She crawled along the floor and found twenty or thirty more under the shelf. They were all quite interesting, words like "Mar-

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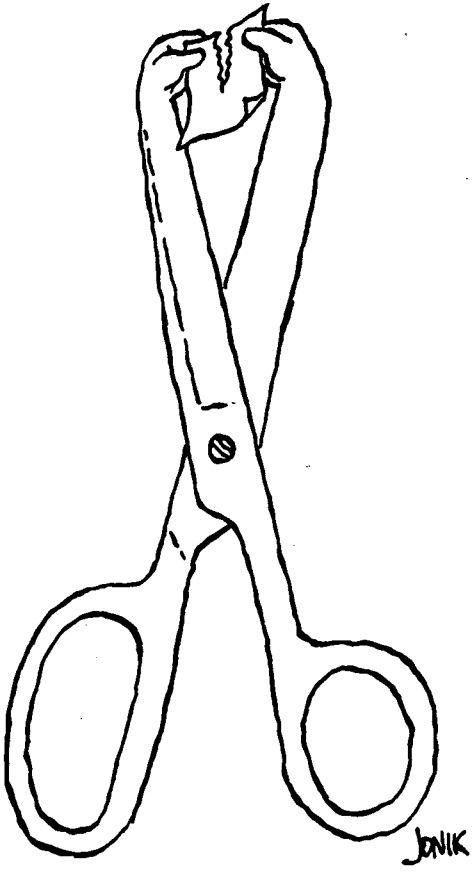
iner" and "Voyager" and "Mir," many of them with the precise little drawings that make dictionaries so interesting. She gathered them up and put them in her pocket to look at when she got home.

"All set?" Mr. Wilhelm had come in to turn out the lights.

"All set!" Carrying the poster, she went back out to the hall. She could see now that the poster was like a new idea, not quite finished but ready to be expanded. Brimming with possibilities, Janell hurried out into the bright starry night.



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Michael Coney lives on Vancouver Island, where the following story is set. "Die, Lorelei" is a science fiction story about dolphins and humans. But it manages to do so much more than explore the relationship between species. It also shows us a bit of ourselves.

Die, Lorelei

By Michael Coney

A WEST COAST MARCH afternoon, all brightness and sharp winds and puffy clouds. The sea glittering, the sunlight fitful. At the base of the cliff, far below me, the waves spent themselves in cold, booming spray. Away across the channel, a lone sling-glider slid silently northward, dipping past the city of Louise, banking and turning toward Roberts Bay, where the clubhouse is. I shivered. The pilot was due for an icy splashdown in a very few seconds, the jackass. Why would anyone want to go sling-gliding this early in the year?

Later the cliff path fell away, winding down among arbutuses and the ruins of centuries-old houses to a lagoon. A girl was climbing up toward me, thick brown hair streaming in the wind. Diane Westaway. An adapted dolphin frisked at her heels. The animal disappeared into the underbrush, and I heard her call:

"Niceboy! Here, Niceboy!"

Below us, her father's cottage lay at the edge of the lagoon. What a pile

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of junk! It looked as though it had been thrown together by some chance gale. Well, no point in going on down there if Diane was coming up here. Her father kept good liquor, but Diane was beautiful.

She saw me and waved, hurrying up and arriving breathless.

"Hello, Joe," she said. She's breathtaking when she smiles. And when she looks sad, it can break a guy's heart.

"Where are you off to?" I asked.

"Pacific Kennels." She patted the dolphin's head. "I'm having Niceboy checked over. Dad . . . Dad says it's his last chance." Now her mouth was sad.

Daniel Westaway is a ruthless old jerk. "Jesus Christ, what's one dolphin more or less in your father's pod?"

"He says Niceboy is a bad influence on the others. You've seen how he keeps doing things wrong. Dad figures the others are picking up on his habits. They've been acting weird these past few days."

The breeze hissed through the salt grass and bowed the green-budding bushes. The tide was low. Ripples showed around the narrow isthmus where the pebble beach separated the lagoon from the ocean. The rectangular shapes of fish pens poked their fences above the shallow lagoon water.

Beyond the pens, on the landward side where the mud merged into sea grass, lay a huge gray mound, big as a capsized freighter. The Creeping Reef.

Dan Westaway had lured the Creeping Reef into the lagoon with a trail of fish and plankton two years ago. Then he'd drained the surrounding area and waited for the Reef to die.

But the Reef still lived. He told me it was a hive of a cooperative Coelenterata of unusually high metabolism, living, dying, breeding, eating and being eaten. Unlike the other coral formations, the Creeping Reef didn't build on the remains of its ancestors in a random, outward and upward direction. Instead, it seemed to have the gift of growing with purpose.

I remember when it was first reported on Newspocket, must have been ten years ago. It was lying in the middle of the Strait. And since then it had moved almost twenty miles to its present position. That's fast. For a reef, it's something else.

Some said it had evolved as a result of global warming and the change in ocean-current patterns. I wonder. There's the stuff of legends in that reef,

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moving purposefully across the ocean bed. Attracting its prey with a strange, lonely beckoning we can't sense, but other creatures can. Always eating, always changing shape. . . .

There was Dan Westaway, coming out of his cottage. A dozen amphibian dolphins gamboled around him. Fishing time. He crossed the yard, pushed the gate aside, and crossed the pebbles to the water's edge. We heard him whistle. The dolphins bounded forward and disappeared into the surf.

I turned to Diane. "I'll walk with you."

She looked surprised. "Oh . . . . You weren't going to see Dad, then?"

"It was no big deal."

How could I tell her? She thought I was the only friend her father had. I probably was, but how could I explain that it was really her that I came to see, these dark March evenings when Dan and I drank together and the wind rattled the windows in their frames?

She was just back from two years at the Colonial Administration College, and would be leaving Earth for a planetary post in a few weeks. I wasn't in love with her, was I? Hell, I was the same age as her father. Maybe I just loved what she stood for: lively, bouncy young womanhood.

She chattered all the way to Pacific Kennels. And here was the owner, Miranda Marjoribanks, sweeping out of her mock-Tudor establishment to meet us. Flowing robe and handwoven scarf. Artsy-fartsy. Speech cultivated from ancient tapes. Fashion has the strangest aspects — but few so strange as the creatures Miranda produced in the Kennels.

"Ah, Mr. Sagar," she said as though her mouth were full of slightly unripe cherries. "And Diane Westaway. Now nice. What a fine animal," she said automatically, glancing at Niceboy.

Diane explained Niceboy's shortcomings. "Dad says he's stupid, but I don't think he is. He just doesn't . . . cooperate."

"The uncooperative dolphin is often the bored dolphin. Dolphins are intelligent creatures, and a change of companions will frequently work wonders." Miranda opened the gate to the enclosure, shoved Niceboy through, and slammed the gate in one smooth movement. Neatly done. A land shark dashed itself against the wires in frustrated rage. The latch rattled. Niceboy uttered unhappy clicks, watching Diane through the wires, poor guy.

"You're not leaving him in there with those things!" she cried. Sharks were there, and rays and sunfish, marlins and octopuses, lying about on the

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grass. Their gills pulsing regularly as their implanted oxygenators freshened their blood and kept them alive. A nasty sight. A young woman in the uniform of a State Prisoner walked among them, hosing them down and rubbing moisturizer into the marlins and sunfish. Land fish shed scales. The stink was god-awful.

"I can assure you Niceboy is perfectly safe," Miranda said. "I am most particular about the fish I accept in my establishment. A number of my personal friends are on vacation — the Peninsula winters are *so* depressing — and their pets are certainly the type of fish with whom Niceboy would be happy to be associated."

For Diane's sake, I said, "Look, he's making friends already." Niceboy was fencing with an evil-looking hammerhead. The fish soon backed off, discouraged. One up to Niceboy. Diane chuckled, reassured.

"When shall I call back?" she asked.

"Oh. . . . I shall be visiting your father tomorrow, at high tide. . . ." Miranda was already drifting back toward her house, artsy-fartsy dress billowing.

Diane looked at me. I looked at her. She was looking much happier. Niceboy was going to be O.K. I held her eyes just a half-second longer than I should. "You don't need to go straight home. Let's have lunch in Louise." Playing with fire, Sagar. Setting yourself up for heartbreak.

"Good idea, Joe," she said.

HIGH TIDE the following morning. Out in the Strait, a dolphin broke the surface, leaping high, falling back with a clumsy splash. Daniel Westaway put down the binoculars. "They're coming," he said. "They do better without that goddamned Niceboy of yours."

Diane glanced at me, but said nothing. Nearby stood Miranda Marjoribank's hovertruck. The weather was unsettled, spitting rain, and the wind was getting up again. The climate may have changed over the centuries, but March was still March on the Peninsula. We waited.

Things began to happen out there. The occasional ripple of a jumping fish, and the humping back of a dolphin riding herd. Dan grunted, stepped into an ancient dinghy, and paddled off among the pens. A gust of windborne rain swept across the beach. What in hell was I doing here? I had plenty of work back at my slithe farm, but I'd come to this godforsaken spot

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because of the pretty daughter of a marine biologist turned fisherman. I must have been out of my tiny mind.

Miranda Marjoribanks stepped from her truck and joined us, a long raincoat flapping about her ankles. "Terrible weather, Mr. Sagar!" she shouted as though I were deaf.

"Now's Niceboy?" Diane yelled back.

"In good fettle."

We watched Dan struggle with the pens, opening gates, hanging over the side of his heeling dinghy. Risky work. Soon the narrow sluice was alive with fish as the dolphins drove their catch into the lagoon. A salmon broke water nearby with a despairing leap, landing at Miranda's feet. She kicked at it disdainfully. A dolphin appeared, jumping onto the wharf and sliding over to Diane. She bent and patted the animal on the head. It nuzzled her affectionately, uttering clicks and tiny whistles.

She clicked and whistled back. Surprise.

"I didn't know you could talk to them," I said.

She grinned. "Not very well. But they seem to like to hear me try." She gave me an odd look. "Can you hear him now, Joe?"

"No. Not now."

"He's still talking, you know. He says a lot at a pitch too high for humans to hear."

"But not too high for you?"

Her lips were pursed. I could hear no sound, but the dolphin glanced up at her sharply. "Sure, I can hear them," she said. "They teach us a lot of new techniques at Colonial Administration. And they alter us a bit, too. . . . All our senses — they enhance them one way or another. Just so we're better equipped to deal with whatever might come up out there. Maybe we're a bit superhuman. . . ." Her mouth was sad. She was going to leave all this very soon.

Dan was rowing frantically among the pens, closing some gates and opening others while the shoals of fish came on. "A fine catch!" shouted Miranda.

Diane said, "This is where Niceboy screwed up yesterday. First thing we knew, half the fish had swum off down the coast, and he was sitting on the beach over there, looking stupid. It wouldn't have been so bad if it hadn't happened several times before."

Time passed. Dan arrived, wet suit streaming. "We'll go inside," he said.

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He pretended to see Miranda for the first time. "Oh, it's you. I've got no time to start sorting out special fish for you this morning. Maybe some other time, eh?

"My dear man, I didn't come out in all this weather for nothing."

Dan snorted. Diane said hastily, "Come on, Dad. It won't take a minute.

"O.K. O.K. What do you want?"

"Well. . . . Stingrays are very popular right now," said Miranda.

"For Chrissake, you won't get any of those." Dan stared at her disgustedly. "There'll be salmon in there. Maybe a few cod."

"Really, I don't think anyone would be interested in pet cod. Haven't you anything a little more . . . exotic?"

"Maybe I saw a couple nurse sharks in there. Maybe."

"Those will be fine. And anything else interesting, if you will."

Diane uttered a few sounds and leaned over the wharf. I caught a glimpse of tail fins, then the dolphins were gone. Dan grumbled some more, climbed back into his dinghy, and pulled for the pens. Soon he was back, and we gathered around the tiny slipway. Two large fish swam nearby, making forays toward open water, but being driven back by the watchful dolphins. Clever animals, those dolphins. Would they stay well trained, with Diane gone and nobody to speak their language? Dan seized a gaff and waded into the water, jabbing about.

Turmoil in the water. A dark shape appeared near his legs. He stabbed down with the gaff and began to flounder backward up the slipway, pulling. Diane jumped in with a pole tipped with a large wire loop and thrust it underwater. Excitement. Dan yelled and fell on his back with a hell of a splash. Diane giggled, hauling the tail of a black monster up the slipway. Scrambling to his feet, Dan grabbed the head. Soon the fish lay on the wharf, gasping and eyeing us malevolently. Revolting brute. Ugly enough to satisfy the most ardent fish buff. Blood trickled from its gill slits.

Dan and Diane wrestled the other shark onto dry land; this time, Diane was the one to take a dive. She came up laughing, but her father's temper was becoming fouler by the minute. He stabbed around viciously with the gaff, hooking a strange creature with thick lips, a pop-eyed stare, and a meter-long body. How anyone has the nerve to swim in these waters, I'll never know.

"Best get them in your holding tank, woman," Dan grunted. "They aren't born with goddamned oxygenators, you know."

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"Oh, but I'm not taking these."

Time froze. Dan's face was blank. The gaff dropped to the dock. "What's that, you say?" he inquired softly.

"These fish are damaged. See, look at the gills. I can't possibly sell these fish. My clients are accustomed to getting the best."

"They'll heal," said Dan, murder on his mind.

"No doubt. But since a scarred fish is good for nothing but pet food, that is no consolation. Throw them back in the water. I don't want them."

"You ordered them, and you'll take them."

"You have it wrong," said Miranda loftily. "I asked to be shown them. Having seen them, I've turned them down. The prerogative of any viewer of goods. Good day, Mr. Westaway. Good day, Mr. Sagar. And you, Diane." She turned. She flapped back toward her hovertruck.

"Hold it there, woman!" yelled Dan. Three quick strides, and he seized her arm.

"Let me go, you animal!"

"Dad!" called Diane warningly.

"You are well known as the biggest snob on the Peninsula," said Dan in measured tones, holding his audience in a firm grip. "And you have no friends, not since your dispute with the second-biggest snob, Carioca Jones. You're also an unscrupulous businesswoman, riding the crest of the most stupid craze since sling-gliding. You make your money by persuading gullible fools that fish make suitable pets. Since your so-called pets are ill-adapted to land life — and you shouldn't need a marine biologist to tell you that — you make extra money by keeping them alive for their worried owners by selling them replacement oxygenators, and moisturizers, denticure sets, skin powder, salt pills, vitamins, iron tablets, and a whole raft of other junk. And if the fish still go on dying, you take them into your kennels for intensive care, at a price. You're a quack and a crook, woman! You're a disgrace to the Institute of Veterinarians!"

Nice speech: no lies, nothing actionable.

"I shall sue you for assault, you swine!"

"Get the hell out of here!" Dan snapped, letting her go.

Her gaze roamed over the property. She needed a comeback. She found one. The gray bulk of the Creeping Reef loomed beyond the pens like a cluster of elephants with their trunks pointing up. "I understand you intend to destroy that reef — and you call yourself a marine biologist! That

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reef is composed of a million creatures, each of which has as much right to life as you, Daniel Westaway! I assure you that if you so much as shake a fist at that reef, I will have the media and the police here so fast you won't know what hit you. Do I make myself clear?"

"You don't know what you're talking about," said Westaway tiredly.

He detested Miranda. Was it partly because Diane had persuaded him to let Miranda look into Niceboy's problem? Did he resent the suggestion that she might succeed where he had failed? Of course he did. But there was more to it than that, surely?

Over the next couple of days, the rain abated, but the wind suddenly got up again and stripped the shingles from my small factory. I make slitheskin adornments there — or had until my workers struck. They didn't like water trickling down their necks and shorting out the machinery. I can't blame them for that.

The slithes themselves, blue reptiles, huddled inside their huts as the wind drove salt spray among the pens. I hadn't seen them looking so miserable since the day Carioca Jones brought her land sawfish Cholmondeley to the farm. Their color changes, chameleonlike, according to their mood. Yellow for fear, blue for misery, pink for love, all kinds of shades between. It's taken a century to breed them into that format. They shed their skins annually. If the skins are treated immediately, they live on, and can be made into simple clothing: scarves, robes, things like that. And they still change color — according to the mood of their human wearer. . . .

I replaced the shingles and settled the strike. By Thursday morning, I needed to get away from it all, so I jumped into the hovercar, ignored my foreman as he came running with news of some last-minute disaster, and drove away fast.

I stopped at the junction with the main track leading to Louise. Where to go? Carioca Jones was out of jail and back in residence at The Stars, her aerial house. Weird woman, but good for an afternoon's gossip. But did I need the company of an aging movie star who talked of little but her latest activist exploits?

No, I didn't. I turned south. Soon I was parking the hovercar and making my way down the lagoon. The wind had died; the sea was oily flat. People were swarming around Dan Westaway's beach cottage. I was not

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the only visitor this morning.

The police had gotten there before me.

Oh God. Something terrible had happened. Diane. I started to run. Diane lying torn and motionless. Diane savaged by one of those diabolical land-shark packs that have been roaming the Peninsula recently. But there was only one copter beside the cottage. Blue-striped: police. The ambulopter had not been called. Nobody was hurt.

Warren Rennie, the Louise police chief, was being yelled at by a red-faced Dan Westaway.

"That goddamned woman said she'd get me, and by Christ, she's done it!" His face thrust close to Rennie's. "What the hell is the procedure, Rennie? Do I lay charges with you right now, or what? Are you sending your men to search her goddamned place?"

Rennie said calmly, "Where's your evidence, Dan?"

"Evidence? Evidence? Aren't a dozen dead dolphins evidence enough for you? Come with me!" And he strode along the rim of the lagoon, the cops and myself trailing behind. I couldn't see Diane anywhere. "That woman sneaked in here last night and laid poison down. Her house is just up there — see the chimney above the trees? I sure hope you're taping all this!"

"In due course," said Rennie patiently. "I don't want to record anything you might be sorry for, Dan."

"Joe heard her," snapped Dan suddenly, wheeling round on me. "Tell him, Joe! Tell him how that goddamned Marjoribanks woman was screaming threats the other day!"

I hesitated. I got a piercing glance from Rennie. He's famous for them. "There was a disagreement," I said weakly.

Dan uttered a bark of cynical laughter. "Disagreement, you call it? Just why the hell are you so set on defending that woman, Sagar?"

What could I say? We hurried along the muddy beach, passing the crude dam Dan had built after he'd lured the Creeping Reef into the lagoon. Now that arm of the lagoon was drained and the Reef immobilized. Maybe. It loomed before us, five meters high, six or seven meters wide, and all of forty meters long; crescent-shaped. It was dull gray and granular like pumice. The lower two meters looked dense and solid; but higher up, it became convoluted, its form twisted into strange spirals, whorls, and pillars like a church organ designed by a madman. Within the crevices, echinoderms lurked: starfish, sea urchins, sea eggs.

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"This goddamn thing's still alive," murmured Rennie, watching the rippling cilia of an anemone. "What the hell does it live on?"

The anemone ensnared a scarlet butterfly. The tentacles stiffened and curled, tucking the insect down into the stomach.

"Well, I'm damned," somebody said wonderingly.

"The whole Reef's alive," said Dan. "This way. Around here."

We entered a recess. Diane was there, flanked on three sides by twisting walls of the Reef. She smiled at me, then addressed her father. "Dad. . . . I think you should —"

"O.K." Dan cut her short. "Now take a look at this, Rennie." Flukes drooped over coral; the head and body were tucked into a cave. "One of my trained dolphins. This is how we found her. The others were here, too, all around the Reef. Twitching. We took them home, but we couldn't do a thing for them. They all died. Poisoned. I'd know the symptoms anywhere. What do you have to say about that, eh?"

"Dad, you've got to look at this," said Diane firmly.

"Huh?" Dan moved forward, staring at the corpse. "Oh Jesus," he muttered. He picked up a piece of driftwood and prodded the body. He lifted the tail. We crowded around.

Where the dolphin had come into contact with the Reef, the flesh was gone. My skin crawled. A million tiny cilia withdrew into shells. Farther in the crevice, anemones worked away busily, unheeding. A crown-of-thorns starfish lay across the dolphin's head, feeding silently. Revolting sight.

A policeman said, "That's unusual, isn't it? Dolphins have tough skins, and there's no decomposition yet. How in hell. . . ?"

"It's being dissolved," said Dan slowly. "The coral's secreting a solvent. So are the other creatures, I guess. . . . " He straightened up. "I'll have to study this. But it doesn't affect the issue. Something had to kill the dolphin first. My examination of the other animals indicated poison in the bloodstream. Let's get back to the cottage."

We moved out of the recess, thank God. We were surrounded by untold millions of life-forms, out of their element. Every one fighting for survival. . . .

"Hell!" somebody exclaimed.

I said to Diane, "Amazing that the Reef should be alive at all. All these things: the starfish, the sea urchins, the coral itself. How do they live

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without water?"

"Dad has some theory . . . ." She turned away. "What's the matter, Jim?"

One of the cops was bent over, staring at the back of his hand. Jim Anders. "Stings like hell," he muttered.

"Let me take a look," said Diane. "Here, keep still. You've touched a sea egg." She squeezed the flesh, prodded the shaft of the slender thorn where it protruded from the skin. "Don't rub it. There are barbs on the end; you'll only work it in. I'll take it out back at the cottage."

"I didn't touch anything," said Anders.

"You can brush against these things without even seeing them," Diane said. "I've had plenty of them in me, skin diving."

There were tears of pain in Anders's eyes. His other hand was clenched tightly around the right wrist. The flesh was flaring angry red round the thorn. Nasty. "I didn't touch anything," he muttered obstinately.

I picked up a chunk of sea-bleached driftwood and waved it at the sea-egg squatting in a small hole, then examined it.

Half a dozen black needles projected from the surface. . . .

Jesus Christ! I grabbed Diane's arm and dragged her out of range, yelling a warning to the others. Dan hurried toward us. The police gathered around. I showed them the driftwood.

"You mean the sea egg *projected* the spines?" asked Dan.

"Try it yourself."

"No, Dad," said Diane hastily. "I saw it. This is what killed our dolphins. They all had spines sticking in them, remember? We thought they'd picked them up when we dragged them off the Reef."

"We want the ambulopter at Westaway's place right away!" Rennie spoke into his wrist visiphone. "How are you feeling now?" he asked Anders, who was hunched over his pain, gray-faced.

Dan said, "This isn't a normal sea-egg spine. This is different. The whole goddamned Reef is different."

As he spoke, I saw a gull perch on a coral pinnacle. It eyed the dolphin's carcass. It was waiting for us to move away, the greedy scavenger.

"Sit down; that's the best thing." Rennie produced a knife, bent over Anders, and did something unpleasant. I saw blood welling. "Just keep still. We'll have help here in a minute." He turned savagely on Dan. "You call yourself a biologist? Why in hell didn't you know about this? All that crap about Miranda Marjoribanks. You're lucky I didn't have my recorder

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on, Westaway. I tell you this: if Anders. . . ." He shut his mouth quickly.

"He'll be O.K.," said Dan. "He took only one dart. The dolphins took dozens. I wonder. . . ." He stared at the Reef. "Dolphins are usually sensitive to danger. I don't understand what made them start sniffing around the reef in the first place."

"Well, it sure as hell wasn't Miranda Marjoribanks!" snapped Rennie.

Dan wasn't a guy to admit error. So he began to theorize aloud about the nature and evolution of the Creeping Reef. Anders moaned softly, and Rennie watched the sky impatiently.

Why had Dan abandoned his profession and opted for the simple life, anyway? That was scientific enthusiasm in his eyes, surely, as he watched the Reef and spoke of Anthozoa and Hydrozoa, polyps and medusae?

The ambulopter. A whirl of sand and pebbles. They loaded Anders in. The police copter lifted off shortly afterward, leaving Diane, Dan, and me standing in the sudden quiet.

"That gull hasn't moved," said Dan.

The Reef had turned the tables on the scavenger.

FEUDS ARE the main pastime of many Peninsula inhabitants, but not me. During the next week, I heard rumors of more nastiness between Dan and Miranda Marjoribanks, so I kept clear of both the lagoon and Pacific Kennels. A guy can get caught in the middle.

The next Sunday, I called on Carioca Jones. Why? Because she's one of my best customers. No other reason. We sat in the observation lounge of her aerial house, watching the slow wash of waves on the shore a hundred meters below.

That house is uncomfortable in blustering March winds. As we swung drunkenly across the sky, she gave me a squeal of delight and clutched my arm, spilling liquor on the upholstery.

"Isn't it just too exciting, Joe darling?" she trilled.

"Has the cable been tested recently?"

"Miranda was here yesterday, and she was quite frightened. She has no head for heights, the dear girl."

"Miranda here? I thought you couldn't stand the sight of her."

Black eyes flashed. "Joe, really, whatever gave you that idea? If you mean that silly little misunderstanding over the feeding frenzy at her kennels —

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well, mature women like Miranda and I do not allow such things to stand in the way of our friendship. It's over and forgotten, Joe. I called her to examine Cholmondeley, who has been out-of-sorts recently."

The appalling sawfish lay on the rug before us. It heard its name and twitched its head. Its meter-long weapon swished past my ankles. Jesus Christ. "Steady there, boy," I muttered. The brute watched me, sharklike body tense, oxygenator pulsing under its gill slits. My skin tingled.

"But it finished up with Miranda feeling sicker than the fish!" laughed Carioca, gripping my arm with a perfect hand as the house lurched again. Best not to think about the reason an elderly woman has such young hands. "I had to winch down to earth before she could complete her examination. However, I agreed to *fling* the Foes of Bondage into full support of her great cause. That pleased the dear girl!"

"I thought the Foes had been disbanded."

"Joe, simply because that *revolting* Penal Reform Act has been temporarily suspended is no reason to *jettison* the wonderful esprit de corps that characterizes my organization. The Foes live on, united to a person, seeking only a cause with which to identify ourselves! And now we have found a cause, thanks to the vigilance of Miranda Marjoribanks!"

"Uh, what cause have you found?" I inquired nervously. Carioca's activist group bothers me. Once, I was a member, but I found their methods tough to take. I guess I'm just naturally a law-abiding citizen. Unlike Carioca, fresh out of jail and already spoiling for a fight.

She was looking serious. "Did you know the uncouth fisherman Westaway is planning to dynamite the Creeping Reef? He's going to blow up this unique example of amphibian life simply because it stands in the way of his *megalomaniac* profiteering?"

"I know it killed his dolphins."

Carioca sniffed. "No doubt it had good reason. However, the Foes propose to foil his plot, even if it means picketing the Reef itself. We shall perish in the blast of Westaway's foul explosion, rather than allow such beauty to be despoiled and raped!"

"Uh, I wouldn't get too close to that reef if I were you, Carioca."

"I am fully aware the poor creature has its inadequate defenses," she assured me.

Should I warn Dan? Darn right I should. I found him in his yard, throwing a stick for a dolphin to chase. The creature bounded to the gate, nudged the

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latch with his nose, and pushed the gate open. Clever stuff. It slithered over the pebbles, retrieved the stick, and returned, smiling and panting. Dan saw me and grunted.

"Miranda Marjoribanks is setting the Foes on you, Dan," I told him.

"I know. I'll be ready." He glanced toward the Reef. "Just as soon as the explosive arrives, that baby will blow, Foes or no Foes. Come in and have a drink. I haven't seen you for a week or two, Joe."

Diane was in the cottage, preparing supper on an old-fashioned woodstove. Dan sometimes took his back-to-nature principles to extremes. On a bench in the corner stood his electron microscope and some fragments of coral.

"Couldn't you just build a fence around the Reef, Dan?" I asked.

He poured drinks, handed me one, and sat down. "It would cost too much for a fence high enough. The dolphins seem to be fascinated by the Reef, and they can leap ten feet. Besides, I just don't want the Reef around. There's something weird about it. Something I don't understand."

Maybe. Or maybe the Reef was merely an excuse for a confrontation with Miranda. "You can't just blow it up," I said. "You're a marine biologist, for Chrissake!"

Diane frowned at me warningly, but Westaway continued equably enough, "Sure, but I'm a fisherman as well, and I depend on trained dolphins. The very presence of that Reef seems to distract them. I was already having problems before they were killed. It's as simple as that. I've studied the Reef, and I've written up my findings, and there's nothing about the Reef that's any more unusual than a land shark — except that it's adapted to dry land without the help of man. It's a curiosity, that's all. There could be hundreds more out there. So I've done my job as a biologist, and now I'm going back to earning a living."

"You have a dolphin out there. He seems O.K."

"That's Niceboy. He's a fool." Dan hesitated. "He made his own way back from Pacific Kennels a couple of days ago. Missed Diane, I guess." He stood. "Come over here, if you're interested in the Creeping Reef."

It was a fascinating story, illustrated with video and fragments of coral, told in his gruff, flat tones in the tumbledown cottage at the edge of the lagoon while the evening winds of March wailed outside, and the waves scrambled over the pebble beach.

"The secret is in the metabolism," he was saying. Diane sat nearby. Why

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was she so restless? "The stony coral — Madreporaria — is a group of the order Zoantharia, which includes sea anemones. The hard part of the coral, the shell, is composed of calcium carbonate derived from seawater. Normally, a colony builds on the hardened deposits of former generations. But in the case of the Creeping Reef, the coral has evolved the capability of secreting a powerful acid, dissolving old deposits and reconstituting the lime for new polyps. The process of extracting lime from seawater has been bypassed."

He was staring somewhere over my head. His drink was forgotten. "And two new elements have evolved — a rapid metabolism and a hive instinct. These enable the Creeping Reef to move in any direction favorable to itself at a rate of over four kilometers per year. In general, this will cause it to move against the plankton flow. Unless it gets interested in something else — like my dolphins seeding the ocean bed with carrion a couple of years back.

"So the Reef became a menace to shipping and to fishing, and we corralled it in the lagoon and waited for it to die. And nobody complained."

He paused , emptying his glass at a gulp. I asked, "Why didn't it die?"

"The Reef evolves fast. Just think how quickly those tiny polyps must bud, for the reef to move four kilometers in a year. And it was accustomed to being exposed at low tide. It adapted to land life without difficulty. Maybe food isn't so plentiful — but the metabolic rate has slowed accordingly, like a bear in hibernation. And the anemones, the sea eggs, and the sea urchins have come to its aid, living with the corals in symbiosis."

"I'll go along with that," I said. "But I still don't understand how it feeds. It can't move."

"There are plenty of insects around — the lagoon's alive with mosquitoes. Aerial plankton. And then "—his expression became even sourer — "It can attract larger game, it seems. Stray land sharks, garden barracuda, all those crazy things living wild around the Peninsula. And birds. And my dolphins."

Then he clammed up. Diane invited me to supper, kind girl. I spent the evening flirting with her while Dan sat in morose silence. But even Diane seemed distracted.

"What's the matter?" I asked. I guess she was thinking of her future among the stars. And leaving her dad alone here.

Her eyes were far away. "Oh, just listening to the wind," she said.

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Sunday morning. The visiphone buzzed at about ten o'clock. Carioca's face appeared, slightly out-of-focus to blur the wrinkles.

"Joe!" she cried. "The Foes of Bondage are staging a mass meeting at noon, outside the *Princess Louise.* Everybody who is anybody will be there, and I'm *quite* sure we can count on your presence. I shall address the crowd, and so will dear Miranda, and then we shall march en masse to the lagoon. By the way, did I tell you I was going to order one of your *delightful* slitheskin wraps?"

Blackmail, huh? So be it. "I'll be there. But I'm not happy about taking sides."

"Sides don't matter in a demonstration, Joe. It's numbers that count. My intelligence agents inform me that the *odious* Westaway has received his shipment of explosive, and I intend to make sure the darling Reef is festooned with friends and protectors — and let Westaway press his awful button, if he *dares*!"

"For Chrissake, keep people away from the Reef, Carioca. They released Jim Anders from the hospital only yesterday. He was in bad shape for a while."

"And wouldn't you fight back if your very *life* were in jeopardy? I tell you this, Joe — I'm quite sure the sympathies of the entire Peninsula, not to mention the nation as a whole, are with that poor terrified Reef 100 percent! Heavens, look at the time. I must fly. Bye, Joe *darling*."

The screen went blank. I sipped my hot drink thoughtfully. The Foes had a knack for arousing public interest. If Carioca had enlisted 3-V coverage — and she was not a woman to shun the media — Dan's chances of disposing of the Reef were slim.

I slid out my Newspocket and switched on. Instantly, the face of Miranda Marjoribanks appeared on the tiny screen. Good grief. I switched off hastily. The battle of the Creeping Reef was well on the way to becoming a cause célèbre.

Back at the farm. The wind had got up again, and some of the ramshackle slithe huts were in danger of lifting off, bearing their occupants aloft like Carioca's house. I rolled rocks in through the entrances while the slithes cowered in the corners in a blue funk.

At 11:30, I called the lagoon. Diane's face appeared on the screen. I stood out of sight of the pickup eye, breathed heavily, and announced: "This is an

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obscene visiphone call." Funny me.

"Oh good. I need cheering up. What disgusting thing are you going to show me, Joe?"

"How did you know it was me?"

"I recognized the breathing. Seriously, Joe, did you know we're expecting a battle here today?"

"Yes. Where's your dad?"

She made a face. "Out there with a long stick, poking Poppits into the Reef. Joe — I can't make him see reason. The police were here earlier, and that snide man Rennie told him the Foes were obtaining an injunction. If he blows the Reef up, he'll be in big trouble. Dad just laughed at him, Joe."

Oh hell. "I'm going to the meeting right now, sweetheart. If I get the chance, I'll try to head the Foes off, but I don't think there's much I can do. They're all set to humiliate your dad, I guess. It's Miranda's revenge. They'll serve the injunction and stand around laughing, daring him to press the button. What are Poppits, anyway?"

"The latest thing in destruction." She grimaced. "Instant heat, radio-controlled. When you set a Poppit off, anything touching it expands so fast it pretty well vaporizes. I don't think Dad'll be able to resist using them. Please don't blame him," she went on. "He'll need company when I'm gone, Joe. He doesn't make friends easily, not since Mom died."

"You never told me how she died."

"It happened on a field trip around the Gulf Islands. . . ." She hesitated. "He's never told me the details, just that she was diving at the time. I was just a kid. He quit his job and took up fishing, after."

Once, Daniel Westaway had said to me, "A fisherman doesn't love the sea, Joe. He loots it. . . ."

I switched off and headed for Louise. Sweeping crosswinds flayed the flat land, bending trees like bows. Tricky driving. Several times I was blown off the road and found myself plowing through the bush. Eventually I cut lift and put weight on the guide wheels; that helped some. I arrived in town shortly after noon, parked, and walked a couple of blocks to the huge beached cruise ship, the *Princess Louise.*

A platform had been set up on the sidewalk. I heard a shrill voice haranguing the crowd. At least five hundred people were there, and 3-V cameras. Heck of a mob, and more were arriving.

". . . Man the Despoiler," the voice was saying. "Is there no limit to which

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he will go? Must he grind all other life under his heel in his quest for supremacy? The auk went, and the passenger pigeon; the giant panda and the Siberian tiger, the grizzly and the moose. . . ."

The speaker was Miranda Marjoribanks. "A few of us struggle against the tide of indifference," she shouted. "Some of us make our small contribution toward the continued existence of the animal kingdom — if *kingdom* is the right word for that pathetic handful of survivors. I like to think I do my share." She stopped and patted the head of a small spotted dogfish lying beside her. "At Pacific Kennels, I re-created terrestrial life. With love and devotion, I replace what the hatred and jealousy of man has taken away from us. I urge you to call at the Kennels at any time and witness the transformation I have wrought, see the creatures to whom I have given a new, exciting life. My pets are for sale." She picked up the dogfish, cradled it in her arms, and stroked its head. "He knows not unselfish love, who has not received the devotion of a dogfish," she pronounced, as though it were a quotation. Maybe it was.

The crowd murmured its approval, then buzzed with anticipation as Carioca Jones stepped up to the microphone. She smiled brilliantly and brandished a wad of paper. Above her a banner flogged in the gale.

"My friends! This is an injunction granted us by the court! It says that the *loathesome* creature Westaway may not murder the Creeping Reef, on peril of instant imprisonment! Isn't that just wonderful? I'm sure you're all as excited as I am, so I propose we march to the lagoon this *minute* and confront him! Refreshment trucks have been organized en route, you may be sure. And transport has been arranged for the journey back. As you all know, there's no anticlimax *quite* so abysmal as having to march all the way back after a demo."

She smiled even more broadly, her mouth a scarlet gash in the dissipation of her face, her black hair streaming lank in the damp wind. Ghastly woman, doing what she did best. Beside her, Miranda was trying to say something, but finding herself upstaged — the eternal fate of Carioca's costars. "So off we go!" cried the ex–3-V star gaily. "Raise your banners, everyone!"

A forest of whipping flags rose before me. I backed off and scurried for the car, feeling like a deserter. I saw one or two members of the sling-gliding club standing on the fringe; Doug Marshall called some jocular remark after my fleeing back. I drove south on low lift, keeping the guide wheels down.

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I FOUGHT THE wheel all the way. Not much traffic about, but twice I passed parked refreshment trucks full of goodies for the marchers. Just past Pacific Kennels, the road takes a dogleg before deteriorating to the track down to the lagoon. Diane was toiling up the hill, looking hot and windblown. Niceboy floundered at her heels.

"Dad said to take him back to the Kennels," she said unhappily.

"I thought he had his knife into Miranda."

"Sure, but he said he wasn't going to be gypped, and he wasn't taking Niceboy back until he was cured." She hesitated. "I'm really worried, Joe. Dad's planted all the Poppits, and he's just sitting there gloating over the control box. I. . . . I think something terrible is going to happen. . . ."

I drove down to the lagoon and parked. Dan stood outside his cottage, hands on his hips, grinning. "Come to watch the fun, Joe?"

The guy was totally at ease. The control box sat on the bench nearby, against the lee wall of the cottage. Surf pounded the pebbles, and the air was misty with driven spray. Lousy weather for a confrontation. Wetness was soaking through my pant legs. Dan must have been wet too, but nothing was fazing him this morning.

Later the police copter arrived, wobbling dangerously in the gusts, scattering seaweed and driftwood. Warren Rennie strode toward us, looking angry.

"You're still going through with this thing, eh, Dan?" he gave me a piercing look. He saw me as an accomplice. I might find myself in jail, if Dan didn't wise up. "There're almost a thousand marchers up the hill, man. What the hell can I do if things turn ugly?"

"Almost a thousand dumb hypocrites in Louise alone," Dan murmured, surprised. "Doesn't it prove what's just under our skin, waiting for a rabble-rouser to bring it to the surface? Those marchers eat meat. They spray their rosebushes. They put down rat poison. Now somebody tells them that goddamned Reef is precious and wonderful, unlike the rat. And they believe it — and they'll fight for it without question.

"I tell you this, Warren — the Reef is a killer. Let's hope there aren't many more like it around here, or the fishing industry'll be finished."

"If anyone blows up that Reef, Dan," said Rennie, "I'll escort them to jail personally."

A nasty silence. I wished I were home. Dan, six police, and I stood

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staring at the Reef. Jesus, I wished I knew what was going on in Dan's mind.

Then we heard the shouting. A great mob of people straggled down the hill toward us. Men, women, kids, dogs, even land fish. Banners flogged above them. Carioca Jones marched at their head. The column was endless, disappearing over the crest of the hill. I felt horribly outnumbered. How did Dan feel?

Carioca Jones halted before us. A real mess, makeup streaming, black hair stuck to her scalp. But her eyes were bright with triumph. She waited for Miranda and the others to catch up, then reached into her jeweled purse. She drew out the papers with a flourish The crowd stilled. They stretched right up the cliff track and around the promontory. Romans at an amphitheater, waiting for the kill. Carioca handed the papers to Dan.

"And what do you have to say about this, you blackguard?"

Dan read the injunction quickly, smiling. Warren Rennie had moved over to the control box, on guard.

Dan said, "That's fine, Carioca. It looks legal to me, all right."

Her eyes narrowed. She wheeled around to a cohort. "Eve! Lead the marchers over to the Reef, will you?" She turned back to Dan. "You don't fool me. Now, remove the charges before you endanger the lives of *hundreds* of innocent people!"

"No."

"My *God*. Do you know what you're saying, man?"

"The injunction says I mustn't destroy the Reef. That's fine. I haven't destroyed it. But the Poppits stay, and I wouldn't try pulling them out of the Reef yourself, Carioca. Jim Anders will explain why."

"You, Warren Rennie! You call yourself a policeman, yet you allow this devil to hold us all hostage?"

It was a tough one for Rennie. "You're all free to go, Carioca," he pointed out, sensible guy.

She glared around, impotent. "Miranda! This is your party, I understand. Get something happening before we all *die* of boredom. Why I consented to become involved I'll never know. Why, they haven't even picketed the Reef yet. They're all standing around like *cattle*. What in hell is going on?"

"They say they won't go near the Reef, Carioca," said the woman Eve. "They say it's dangerous."

"Of course it's dangerous! It's meant to be dangerous! But don't come whining to me, my good woman. Miranda Marjoribanks organized this

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debacle. Speak to her! I wash my hands of the whole affair."

And there was Diane, at the back of the crowd, halfway up the hill. She looked kind of lost. She watched us for a moment, then moved away toward the Reef, the wind snatching at her jacket and blowing her long hair before her. Did she have some plan? Niceboy was not with her.

"Great victories are not won without sacrifice," Miranda began, turning and facing the gathering, the gale whipping her words away. Probably most of the people didn't realize she was addressing them. "Surely a little danger is worth facing for the sake of this unique example of nature's art? After all, what are we talking about? It's the age-old war between life and beauty on one hand, and greed and materialism on the other. You see before you — she stabbed a dramatic finger at Dan — "this plunderer, this. . . ." Her voice trailed away. She stared over the heads of the mob.

"Don't do it, Dan," I said. Then I saw it, too.

By now the demonstrators were all crowded around the yard and on the beach. Rennie, Dan, Carioca, Miranda, and I were grouped in the lee of the cottage, beside the bench. On the bench lay the control box. On the control box was a red button. I guess we were all guarding that button against any maniac action. Beyond the crowd the hillside rose, grass and bushes whipping in the wind.

Diane walked alone over there. Slowly and dreamily, as though she didn't know we were here.

And over the top of the hill, dancing and sparkling on the wet grass, came a great multitude of land fish.

"Oh my God!" exclaimed Miranda. "They've escaped from the Kennels! How in hell did they get out?"

Dan chuckled. "And they're headed for the Reef, woman. And the Reef can shoot poisoned spines. I'm afraid your fish are going to die. Every last one."

"Why the hell are they making for the Reef, Dan?" snapped Rennie. He seemed to think it was Dan's fault.

"I told you the Reef was dangerous." The fisherman was smiling. "It got my dolphins, and for months it's been luring everything edible its way, land fish or birds. It has to eat a lot, you see. It has a very high metabolism. . . ."

That great pack of land fish was headed down the hill, but Diane walked between the fish and the Reef. I yelled a warning. She was too far off to hear.

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And anyway, she was in a world of her own. The land fish swept down on her in a menacing silver tide.

And they passed her by, parting around her as though she were a rock. I grabbed the bench to steady myself. What a god-awful moment. The fish bore on, leaving one creature behind with Diane. Niceboy. She patted the dolphin on the head as she strolled on.

"For God's sake, stop them, someone!" Miranda screamed. "There's a fortune tied up in those fish!"

Dan was still talking, but only I was listening. "So the Reef evolved the method of attracting its food by sound waves. Those coral build on one another in a convoluted pattern. They build fast and quick. The colonies that survived were the ones that converted the wind into sonic patterns that attracted animals: fish, birds, and even insects. Very high frequency sounds, Miranda. Humans wouldn't hear them. But your fish —"

Wham!

The Creeping Reef erupted into a fountain of fragments. The ground trembled. Diane fell to the ground; chunks of coral rained about her. The land fish milled about for a moment, then scattered as they fled for the bush. A pall of smoke and pulverized coral hung in the air, then streamed away on the wind. We ducked as small rocks rained down. The yelling died to a babble of comment.

Diane stood. I heard myself gasp with relief.

The Creeping Reef? Just a great black scar in the mud. Water flowed in, and the scar began to disappear.

Dan was still talking. Had he ever stopped? "You see, it can't grow again. Its metabolism is too high. The individual corals will die of starvation before they have time to regroup into sonic whorls. . . ."

Carioca Jones drew breath. She whirled round. "You unspeakable *bastard*, Miranda! After all my work, all the devotion to duty of my dear Foes — and you sell us out for the sake of a few goddamned *fish*!"

Miranda denied pressing the button, of course, but it didn't get her anywhere. Nobody had seen it happen; they'd all been watching the suicidal land fish. But they knew Miranda.

"*Dear* Miranda," Carioca Jones said to me a few days later, "is a shewd businesswoman, but not *quite* the type of person I would consider as a guest at my Easter Arts Festival." And with a stroke of the pen on her party list, she relegated the veterinarian to the bottom of the Peninsula's social

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league.

Warren Rennie wasn't laying charges. "She didn't do it, Joe. I know who did, but I can't prove it. If you want the truth of it, well, Dan Westaway outsmarted me. He saw the perfect moment to frame his enemy, and he reached out with his itchy little finger, the bastard. All the same. . . ." He sighed. "I'm not sorry to see that goddamned Reef out of the way. I mean, I'm as fond of nature as the next guy. But that Reef, there was something . . . evil about it. It got Dan's wife years ago, did you know? While she was diving. Maybe some things are just not meant to live in harmony with human beings. . . ."

So that explained Dan's hatred of the reef.

I saw Diane shortly before she left to catch the shuttle from Sentry Down spaceport. A dolphin was emerging from the surf nearby. He floundered across the beach, reared up, and unlatched the gate with his nose. Diane patted him, and Niceboy uttered a few whistles and clicks — among other sounds I couldn't hear, but Diane could.

She whistled back and said, "I can't help talking to him. I keep forgetting he's deaf. We found that out only a few days ago. That's why he couldn't herd fish — he couldn't hear what the other dolphins were saying. Otherwise, he's a very smart animal."

Smart enough to open latches . . . . I wondered if Diane knew how her dad had used her and her pet, that March afternoon when Niceboy let the fish out of Pacific Kennels. Dan had known that would happen. So they came flowing down the hill in a glittering silver tide, answering the call of the Reef.

The Creeping Reef. . . . There once was a siren on the Rhine who lured sailors onto a jagged reef with her singing. That had been long ago, and anyway, it was just a legend. But sometimes in the evenings, when the onshore breeze plays strange melodies among the fabric of my farm, I think of the Rhine maiden and the Creeping Reef whose music evolved according to its needs. And I wonder: just when and where did the Reef start its journey?

So Niceboy was deaf, and so he didn't die with the other dolphins. But Diane had been *altered*, and she could hear the dolphins talk. . . . And alone among us, she could hear the irresistible call of the Reef. And sometimes in those windy evenings, I see her again in my mind's eye, wandering dreamlike toward the Lorelei and death.

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But she is alive and ageless in her journey through space, because I realized in time, thank God, and reached out and pressed the button.

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

REASONING ABOUT EMOTIONS

Though your brain has about a hundred billion neurons, the same order of magnitude as the number of stars in the Milky Way, its organization is what matters. Your liver has about a hundred million cells, but a thousand livers strung together do not add up to that mysterious sense of Self.

"You"—the thing that Descartes thought unquestionable when he said, "I think, therefore I am"—is a rather abstract entity. Somehow it emerges from three pounds of wrinkled jelly that with a few applied volts can ponder and feel, inventing calculus and knowing inexpressible joy. That Self apparently resides mostly in the highly folded surface of your brain—the cortex, from the Latin for "bark."

But the cortex isn't a woody protective coating—it's apparently the boss. Yet it's only about five millimeters thick, and even with the convoluted folds covers about the same area as an office desk.

Think of your Self, spread out like a big beach towel. Storms and waves of electrical impulses race across it. Slow oscillations of about forty cycles per second seem to supply the familiar, comforting sway of predictable "weather," much as the day-night cycle does for the body. Fitful breezes trace the sweep of momentary sensations. A passing spiky swirl tells of an interesting conversation. And sometimes—less frequently, as we age—great hurricanes blare through, seizing us—the emotions.

Here we connect most profoundly with the body. Emotions reach beyond the computational abstractions of the cortex. They stimulate hormones, accelerate your pulse, quicken your breathing—which then in turn affects your mind, too. It's an illusion to merely think of our minds as cool calculators.

Einstein once remarked that he

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didn't see his theories in mathematical language, much less in ordinary prose. He felt them. Kinesthetic sensations had to come together in a satisfying way, so that he experienced the rightness of the idea.

This suggests to me that thinking about our minds as calculators divorced from the rub of our world, doing computations in a void, misses an important lesson of evolution. We have large, highly developed sensory and motor portions in our brains. Our nervous system is very specific; that's why I argued last time that cavalier claims about linking computers to brains are mostly just daydreams.

We are highly adapted creatures. Our neural nets mirror our survival strategies, right down to the basics which link us so strongly to each other. While plenty of biologists stress how large our brains are, few mention that we have the largest genitalia of all the primates, in ratio with our body weight, and that they capture a disproportionate fraction of our nervous system, too. The sensory and motor parts of our brains have about a million times the effective computational power of our conscious minds. We can walk the walk *and* talk the talk.

Novices at a craft can get by with "book learning"—that is, computational schemes worked up without experience. To become expert, you need hands-on experience. We 'map' our body sensations into representations in our minds. "Flying by the seat of your pants" means that you let the body do a lot of your thinking for you. When you get into your car at the end of your working day, unless you explicitly remember that you have to stop by to pick up a gallon of milk, the sight of familiar avenues will lead your mind to automatically drive you home.

That's why visual aids—graphs, pie charts, four-color charts—get through to people what numbers and sentences do not. So a refrain some philosopher friends and I used to sing, "I've Got Dem Mind-Body Duality Blues," isn't really so. This hints that our fears of disembodied intelligences are a bit off the mark. Mass media science fiction sometimes uses distant, emotionless computers as villains; they're convenient, and express deep uneasiness. But a really effective intelligence will have—and presumably enjoy—a constellation of body-sensations, just as we do. That's a long way off from our present understanding of machine capabilities.

And what does it mean to be human-like, anyway? One of our mass media preoccupations is a rather sentimental reverence for emotion, as if they are more basic than mere dry thinking. To be in the grip of a strong emotion is to "lose

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reason," to feel totally focused on a narrow range of events. When a dire situation arises, emotions take over with dizzying speed. Will I (the Self) escape from this fire? Will I find food? Stay warm? Make a touchdown?

Do we have emotions?—or do emotions have us? This is a deeper question than you may think, because proponents of Artificial Intelligence (AI) have conspicuously neglected the study of emotions. Most seem to feel the subject is just too complicated. Compared with, say, reasoning your way through a theorem in geometry, or picking up a glass of water without spilling it, emotions seem messy, dangerous, hard. After all, our arts and culture mostly concentrate on them.

Could it be that emotions are in fact simple? That they are mysterious to us because we have a blinding flaw in our method, a defect in attitude that makes the way to understanding hard for us to see?

Some ponderers of our Selves are beginning to suspect the second answer is nearer to the truth, principally Marvin Minsky. I've been spending a short sabbatical at M.I.T., taking advantage of the Media Lab here to watch life-size holograms, study virtual reality and artificial life, and talk with Minsky and others. It's influenced the way I think about Mind, and I'll represent here a distilled version of one school of thought about our most deeply felt core—our feelings.

This is a conjectural synthesis by an outsider looking in at a zoo of possibilities—a formal way of saying that basically, folks, I'm winging it here—so no guarantees. The one thing that changes faster than computer capabilities is theories about them.

Emotions come from truly intricate machinery. But the power of emotions over us doesn't necessarily mean the underlying causes are complex. Instead, they may start out with simple but strong drivers that get elaborated by us as we grow up.

Minsky feels that it's the power in emotions that deceives us. Maybe they are "wired up" to sources of forceful inner control, and we're dazzled by that.

Suppose we begin life with some simple building blocks in our brains. These nearly separate drivers—Minsky calls them "agents"—have virtually autonomous control of a specialized range of responses. Evolution would shape them to have clear-cut goals, centered on survival. If the baby runs low on sugar, the "hunger" agent steps forward and seizes control of the conscious and subconscious levels, piloting our attention toward the pressing problem of finding food. Maybe this just

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means opening your mouth so your mother knows to feed you. Later, it may mean conveying this information with facial gimmicks. When you're still older, the hunger agent learns that it can charm some food out of mother or father with a smile, or a gesture, or (much later) a convincing argument about why you really deserve that extra cookie.

The same learning operates for your "cold" agent, which learns to move into the sun, or cover itself with insulators, or snuggle up to someone. This last maneuver proves to have side benefits, bridging the chasm between the baby and other people, and eventually linking up with the "reproduction" agent.

In this sense the emotions are agents narrowly focused on solving problems—they're rational. What makes them seem irrational to us? Because they're often in conflict with forces we've learned about in the world, or even with other agents within us.

We ride herd on our emotions as we age—in fact, that's the usual definition of maturity. This means that the agents get more savvy about reaching their goals. Don't cry for food—charm someone who has some. Babies who learn to smile very quickly get a reward-stimulus of gushing attention, food, the works—which means that a few generations downstream, there'll be more babies with that skill, and fewer who wear a permanent frown. Later, the baby will learn to earn money for food, but by that time its many agents are a well-managed crowd, intent on their little jobs.

You become intelligent, in this view, when your agents collaborate to form an effective team. Mild likes and preferences bring into play cooperation with agents who may have something else in mind. Spending money on a date leaves your "hunger" agent without the cash to indulge in a filet mignon feast.

Sometimes we're aware of our agents. People strike bargains with themselves—"I'll work another thirty minutes before eating that donut." or "If I don't earn more maybe she won't love me." (Agents don't have to be rational, in the sense that their strategies fit the external world perfectly, or make sense to other people when expressed. They won't be well socialized, either. They're basically just smart appetites, after all, not philosopher kings.) Knowing you're confused is actually a high-level activity: evaluating your own states, "feeling" your agents battling with each other.

Agents start out as crude directives. Neural connections in babies elaborate themselves, starting from simple patterns of wiring that only grossly resemble the usual adult

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pattern. Although we're born with almost all the neurons we'll ever have, a baby's brain is only one fourth the mass of an adult's. The brain swells because neurons grow, making many more connections. Stimulus makes this happen. Babies left lying in cribs develop slowly, while ones who get a lot of attention develop skills much earlier.

So the brain learns how to wire itself. The higher up the evolutionary pyramid a vertebrate is, the longer this takes. It's easy to understand why evolution would favor such on-the-job training: it's genetically conservative. If our genes tried to exactly specify each neural connection—hard-wiring us with molecular markers—there would have to be an instruction manual in our DNA. It isn't there—the DNA doesn't have enough storage space to carry a Library-worth of circuit diagrams. Using activity-dependent remodeling is far more economical with DNA space. It also allows us, and other higher animals, to fit ourselves to the environment better.

The simple agents we start out with have only basic instructions, then. This could be why babies jump so suddenly from blissful calm to irritable hunger, or blistering anger. Older children don't skip so quickly among the menu of moods, and their faces show a more complex blend of responses to the world as they age—what we call "character" in a face.

Those beginning agents could then develop semi-independently, storing up private memories of past incidents, learning from the world as they perceive it. They also hear about other agents which can have conflicting needs. Appetites jostle for advantage, slowly learning to use each other productively.

There is considerable evidence that different drives emerge from distinct parts of the brain—the site where an agent "lives," perhaps. Neurologists have classified about a hundred different processing regions in our brains, each a neural subnet. I've concentrated on emotions here because they're mysterious to us, but there can be plenty of other agents, all tutored by experience. Probably it takes several agents to carefully cut up your dinner with knife and fork while you're arguing politics, for example—and another agent is simultaneously keeping a vaguely wary eye out for any disturbance coming in from afar, like a fistfight at the next table, or an earthquake.

Each emotion-agent can feel to us like a different personality acting in our minds. Indeed, to be seized by anger, say, is to be turned into a simple machine, with clear goals ("Hit him!")—though other agents can wrestle for control, especially

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after the central desire is satisfied ("Now that he's down, let's run for it!").

Emotions are powerful because they tap into deep resources. They can command the stage of consciousness, because they were once crucial to survival. But who do they wrest control from? The Self—but who is that? This is what Minsky calls the Fallacy of the Single Self.

We feel that somewhere, deep down in the marshy Mind, there's somebody who is Us. We're the stage upon which our internal dramas act. Suppose, instead, the Self is an intangible thing in the same sense that Beethoven's Fifth is—a symphony of many instruments, expressing themselves in concert. Emotions are hard to contain in the same way that a mob can get out of control—there's no dictator.

Freud's "superego" was the Old Man who made you do the socially-ok right thing, but the Old Man obviously doesn't work well all the time—or else soap operas wouldn't exist. In this view, what makes the Human Condition—a cliche that none the less means much to us—is that we vaguely sense the constant warring agents which make our Selves. To be in complete control of yourself, then, is to reduce yourself, to let one agent rule.

We don't hold absolute sway over the agents because we *are* them. And they don't communicate well. We normally have only a partial idea of what is going on inside ourselves. We don't consciously know how a sentence is going to end when we start it—that job is done by some club of agents who operate beneath our conscious perceptions.

It's easy to see how such an unconscious, collaborating club could evolve—it's much more effective to be able to run fast, holding a spear ready to throw, and also, without a lot of bother, call out to your fellow hunters, telling them to back you up.

Of course, we like to think that we know ourselves. We have our own internal worlds, knowing the ache of a stubbed toe with a poignancy which surpasses our sorrow at, say, the deaths of a thousand people on the other side of the world. But of course we only notice the ache when it crosses a threshold of pain, and are glad when it eases off, falling below that threshold. We often don't really know we're tired until we "discover" that we're yawning—some agent has seized control of our breathing, down in the medulla and made it deliver more oxygen.

So maybe the distinction between reason and emotion, beloved to us all, is the wrong set of polar opposites. If agents evolve as we mature, maybe "simple" vs. "complex" is a

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better way to think about the non-single Self. Reason is more nearly associated with a well-governed society of mind—an orderly legislature. Emotion occurs when a faction seizes the parliament and forces through actions that satisfy short-term interests of a minority—in babies, a single agent.

A vast body of experiment and careful, step-by-step theorizing — unlike the conceptual leaps in Minsky's *Society of Mind* overview—are leading us rapidly toward a new understanding of ourselves. No longer do neurologists separate seeing cleanly from understanding, or even visual comprehension from consciousness. Our potent combination of moment-to-moment awareness, plus quick retrieval of memories, makes up the working "blackboard of the mind" that makes us plan and act better than any other species.

There's a dark underside to all this enlightened progress, though. A biologist friend remarked to me that when he shows visitors to his lab a worm's tiny knot of nervous tissue, and describes how we can now follow all the command routes to wormy thinking, nobody is much concerned.

So he shows them a common house fly. Already he has found the neural wiring that makes the fly weave its erratic course through the air, a feat of piloting they "learn" in moments. He can lay out the specifications of this autopilot on a circuit diagram. This doesn't disturb his guests, either.

But show them a section of a human brain, and point out that a small wedge of it looks pretty much like the common housefly's hard wiring—and you've got trouble.

Determinism. Who likes to think that he or she is simply an elaborately detailed robot, following instructions that genes and happenstance have laid down?

Yet a plain reading of, say, *Scientific American*'s September 1992 special issue on "Mind and Brain," strongly suggests that the brain is not the tool of the Mind, nor a house wherein Mind lives, but the master of Mind. Damage or deprive the brain and you alter Mind. A simple materialistic reading of the data implies that we are biological machines, because that is the operating paradigm, the reductionist instinct, of science.

No higher mental functions are in principle immune to our modern analytic, atomizing frenzy. A recent book, *The Biology of Religion* by Vernon Reynolds and Ralph Tanner, holds that "Religions...act as culturally phrased biological messages...a kind of 'parental investment handbook'." The anthropologist Lionel Tiger (wonderful

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name) holds that natural selection responded to "an age-old problem: what to do with a cerebral cortex that has the capacity to create immobilizing scenarios of disaster and to dwell fruitlessly on the utter meaninglessness of it all." The solution: "wiring into our brains a moderate propensity to embrace sunny scenarios even when they are not supported by the facts."

He has some evidence, too. "People remember 'up' words—'happy,' 'attractive,' 'bright'—in preference to downers. They elect fuzzily optimistic politicians over painfully candid ones. ...One thing likely to keep the endorphins flowing is for everyone to get together and agree on the story that someday everything will get better." Religion he includes among these ideas.

Tiger's ferocious conclusions represent the reductionist wing of current sociobiological theory. I suspect, though, as we accept more and more the computer-like analogy for our Selves, we will see consciousness as a necessary buffer with the world, no more. This kind of shift in thinking we already see in pleas that people, especially the poor, are victims of society or other influences, not responsible for their own failings. Soulless machines can be neither heroes nor villains. Neither can they hold inalienable "rights," some will feel, or take credit for their accomplishments—all is determined by genes and accident, after all.

Well-meaning scientists have shown already that prenatal stresses and 'bad' genes cause later health and mental disorders. Our beleaguered psyches will generalize from the accretion of such self-diminishing truths, and no doubt find it all quite depressing.

But such conclusions are both hasty and oversimplified. Abandoning the model on the Single Self, as Minsky advocates, can be liberating. If our agents do indeed learn and grow, this implies a complex relation between mental events and electrical spurts along axons and dendrites. We are *self-programming*—so a simple deterministic picture doesn't work. The Single Self which sat like an unmoved mover at the center of our minds dissolves, replaced by Mind as an emergent property—one which cannot be accounted for solely by taking the component parts one at a time. In our bodies, the heart beats because its pacemaker responds to the ebb and flow of certain ions. But the pace cannot be fathomed without referring to the effect of the pacemaker on the flux, too. Such interlocking systems may yield consciousness as an *emergent* property, which cannot even in principle be predicted in advance—and there-

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fore cannot be known to be deterministic. It is far too early to resurrect the "free will" arguments of the last century—and I find that liberating.

"Determinism" usually means pre-determining the outcome of events. A Self of many agents cannot be so predicted because, as chaos theory has taught us, in such complex interactions, detailed outcomes cannot be found even with completely specified initial conditions. The best we can do is predict the kinds of outcomes a Self might reach—say, deciding whether to have chocolate or vanilla ice cream, given the Self's past. How much would we need to know to make even this simple prediction possible?

We won't have answers to such issues for quite a while. To take ideas about Self and consciousness further than the maybe-this, maybe-that stage, we need to work out simple models. I would like to see computer programs explore simple situations, following the kinds of rules that "artificial life" research uses.

Take three basic drives, say, and rules for their expression. Let them learn and remember, but communicate between each other only poorly. (One of the crucial ideas here is that you can't let basic agents override each other too easily; pursuing, say, sex and forgetting about hunger could be fatal.) See how well they work, grow and "mature." Whether this approach will reveal more than the biases of the programmers is always a gamble. But it's a start.

One thing is fairly clear, though—consciousness is natural, has deep biological roots. Just as animal bodies emerged from evolution's persistent winnowing, in which chance variation is pruned by natural selection, so animal minds must have some ancient origin in the intricate mechanisms of differential survival, working on the available materials.

By "animal minds" I mean simply that anybody watching a dog or a chimp figure out a problem will recognize signs of an intellect confronting an external world, manipulating it, and storing the fresh information. That's intelligence. Chimps, in fact, can rearrange sentences with the skill of a two-year-old human—but curiously, don't have the subject-predicate sentence-forming talents we manifest naturally. And they apparently never rise above that two-year-old level.

How did mentality arise from cell tissue? Consciousness is prevalent in the biological world. Above the simplest organisms, many animals seem to have some smattering of it. I can think of two general reasons which might explain this, neither compelling.

Maybe consciousness has some

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huge, unique utility. On the other hand, could it be written into the very nature of matter itself, and can't help emerging when particles coagulate in any of a wide variety of ways?

The first possibility is appealing, but it seems easy to imagine even complex organisms making their way, mating and foraging, without having to be guided by sentience. Nobody home but us Expert Systems here, folks.

A counter argument to this observation is that when we look at our abundant natural world, we don't see complex, robot-like species. The insects are simple robospecies, and vastly successful at it, too. Why haven't they inspired higher level organizations? Why don't we see larger, more sophisticated animals who don't seem to have self-awareness? Maybe the talent for making representations of the outer world, not merely taking in signals, is so powerful a tool that nature has found no other way to perform really refined tasks.

So maybe consciousness emerges as organization increases in the brain, period. But suppose consciousness is simply a by-product? As we climb up the evolutionary ladder and the ratio of brain mass to body mass rises, many traits emerge that also have great use—better coordination, vision, weight, etc. Could we be missing the really significant facets of evolution? Just for the sake of argument, perhaps *vision* is the key, and consciousness is just a great way to make better use of eyes. A big fraction of our brains is involved in seeing, after all.

Indeed, one of evolution's great puzzles is why sentience seems to be the preferred method for handling adaptivity to the ever-changing environment. Why not process information without any inner feeling at all? Why does consciousness exist?

The second possibility, that sentience emerges inevitably from the substrate of matter, essentially relegates the issue to other sciences than biology. This implies that there need not be some innate processes in evolution which work toward consciousness. This would be good news for the SETI folk, who tirelessly Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence, since it implies that Mind will arise in myriad physical milieus. But as an explanation, biologists find it unsatisfying, since it leaves them out of the action.

There is an even more unsettling possibility—that we cannot fathom consciousness because of our own limitations. Our human power of comprehension is itself a natural, biologically derived ability, constrained by facets of our origins.

There is no automatic reason why

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our capacity to understand nature extends to all things that puzzle us. As philosophers have long known, the ease of asking questions does not imply an answer. It is a real possibility that our biology has not equipped us to grasp our own consciousness, because it entails whole categories of thought unavailable to us. After all, we probably weren't "designed" to know ourselves, in the sense of sensing how we work mentally. Such capability would have little utility in a hunter-gatherer society; we speculate on such issues because we are playing very different games now.

This line of reasoning is forever uncheckable, of course—it speaks of boundaries we cannot see. Closely allied is the idea that genuinely alien minds would act in ways we could not recognize. The SETI community is gambling that this is not so, but I wonder...

Will truly advanced minds appear to us as natural, though perhaps vast, phenomena? Ants do not ponder the beings whose shoes crush them, after all. And perhaps that's for the best.

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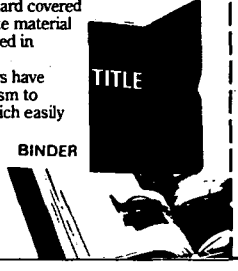

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Barry N. Malzberg says he is writing short stories as if the hounds of Tindolos were pursing. "Something From the Seventies," he writes, "is a dim refractory extension of/or response decades later to my Soulsong for the Sad Silly Soaring Sixties which I sold to Amazing *in 1969 and which, when collected in* In the Pocket and Other Stories *caught Sturgeon's attention in a* Galaxy *book review. 'I was older then. I'm younger now.'"*

Something from the Seventies

By Barry N. Malzberg

BUT WHY ME? WINOgrand said. This was in the interrogation room, a gadget-strewn place which reminded him of the way his industrial-arts classroom had looked in high school. Maybe a little more threatening because the industrial-arts guy was not a spotten alien with what appeared to be a heavy-duty space weapon of an advanced type. I don't remember anything about the seventies, Winogrand said. I slept through the whole decade. The sixties blew me out. It wasn't the drugs, he added, trying a fetching, self-deprecating moue, just the intensity of the time. The assassinations and the sex and all of that stuff. But really most of it's a blur to me.

Strange, the interrogator said, that's what we hear from the rest of you that we've checked out on this. But, really, we can't accept excuses here. We're trying to do some kind of comprehensive history and we can't have a ten-year gap in the Amurrican century. That's what you call it, right? The Amurrican century. That guy, Booth, that was his name for it.

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Luce, Winogrand said. Henry Luce, the guy from *Time*. It's not Amurrican, it's American. Actually, United States. America refers to a bigger place. Where do you want me to start? Winogrand said. He peered over to the shadowed corners of the room in which there seemed to be torture devices, strange implements of an alien sort which he was convinced could do terrible things to Amurrican extremities. That was the trouble with alien invasion and interrogation, it seemed like a joke in the abstract but when you got right to circumstances, they weren't so funny at all. One morning a simple account executive for Universal Steel, the next somewhere in the bowels of what he guessed was an alien spaceship, talking to some multitentacled creature who wanted to obtain information on a dry, senseless time, a decade during which, as he tried to look back upon it, Winogrand had not had four minutes of continuous pleasure. Strung end to end as moments of pleasure never were, he might have had two hours of fun through the internment of the hostages. How could this make him an expert on the period and why had the alien snatched him of all people and put him to this horrid condition? He looked at the implements in the shadows again and shuddered. It was remarkable how plans seemed to unravel, tiny plans hardly voiced even to the self, and then your life was atomized into the chemical stink of an alien interrogation room. Well, that was the decade for you. There was the malaise speech, Winogrand said, that was in the summer of 1979. Right after the second gas shortage, the first having been in 1973, and just before the hostages got snatched in Iran. Carter said that it was all our fault, that the country had a stalking malaise because of the sixties assassinations and all the cynicism. He said we needed a spiritual revival. It didn't go over too well. You understand, most of us had spent June and July trying to get a tankful of gas, they reran that November and December of 1973 energy scam right past us again. What we didn't need was some guy shouting at us that our lousy lives were all our fault. It cost him the election.

Not the hostages? the alien said. Somewhere, the greenly tentacled creature seemed to have picked up a little history on its own; perhaps this was not a true interrogation but one of those traps which sneaky aliens were likely to pull, Winogrand thought. The papers had been full of sidebar stories after the invasion, dealing with the sneakiness and duplicity of the aliens. They told lies about their planet of origin and loved to load up the fade line at craps in the casinos. Perhaps deception like entropy was

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interstellar. We thought it was the hostages swept up at the American embassy in Iran who couldn't be rescued which were responsible for the troubles of your president.

Don't think so, Winogrand said. Look, when you've spent all summer trying to get a tank of gas and fighting 20 percent inflation, you don't need to hear some guy in a sweater telling you that it's all your own fault. Of course that's just my theory, Winogrand said. Nothing is sure with this stuff, you know. Stupid politics, though.

So how did this Carter get to be president in the first place? the alien said. If he was so stupid, how did he become president?

Boy, Winogrand thought hopelessly, these creatures are really out of it, either that or they were faking a consummate stupidity which was hard to believe. Of course it could merely be a display of alien cunning. Watergate, Winogrand said, the presidential resignation in August of 1974. Then Ford pardoned Nixon. You know who these people are? You know what I'm talking about? The alien made quivering motions of agreement. Well, then, the pardon sunk Ford, Winogrand said. That was in September of 1974, exactly one month after Nixon had resigned on August 9 which led people to think that there had been some kind of a strict deal in the first place. Ford never got over the pardon and then in the first debate in October of 1975 he said that a bunch of Communist satellite countries in Eastern Europe were really free. That pretty much did him in since he did not have a major reputation for intellect in the first place. His idea for beating inflation was to make a speech in the summer of 1975 saying that they were going to print up a whole bunch of buttons saying WIN for WHIP INFLATION NOW, you get it? and everyone should wear one. That was his idea of high policy. I don't even want to think of low policy. Do you understand any of this?

More or less, the alien said. Watergate we've learned a lot about already. The question is why when those tapes were found out in July of 1973 which showed your president had taped every word spoken in his offices for four and a half years didn't Nixon at once dispose of them? We have no such parallel in our own history. It seems inexplicable, really.

Oh, it's not so inexplicable, Winogrand said. He was thinking of the pietà at Kent State, that famous photo taken in May 1970 after the Ohio guardsman had shot five students during the campus protests, the girl screaming over the body of the dead boy. The girl it turned out had been a runaway and seeing the picture in the paper was the first the parents had

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heard of her in a year. She had come home but then there were more troubles with drugs and somehow nothing had worked out for the girl. Nothing had really worked out for any of them, even though Winogrand had put the drugs and the peace signs away, had transferred to a university nearer home and had resolved to get a degree in something not very controversial. It's not inexplicable, Winogrand said, because Nixon had himself on tape probably promising Ford that he would make him vice president in October of 1973 if Ford would agree to a pardon if Nixon got jammed too tight. Ford would have known about that and it would have gotten *him* nailed for obstruction of justice if it had come out. So it was useful, I guess, to have a lot of things on a lot of people. That was the decade, Winogrand said. Everybody had something on everybody else. The FBI broke into the office of the psychiatrist of the guy, Ellsberg, who had stolen the Pentagon Papers to try to get something on him. On Ellsberg. If they could have found some interesting crazy stuff back then in 1971, they figured that they could get even with him for releasing that stuff proving that everyone in the Pentagon had known that Vietnam was a lost cause from the beginning. You get it? Getting something on someone was just an instrument of national policy, then. If everybody was wired, then everybody was protected. The Houston Plan, Winogrand said. The Plumbers. Deep Throat in the bowels of the White House, meeting Woodward and Bernstein at the Lincoln Memorial with fancy, private stuff on Nixon. The whole ten years was tattletale, that's all. If the sixties were the caldron with the lid off, the seventies were in the oven. The Philharmonic had had enough of Leonard Bernstein and his fund-raising for the Black Panthers so it got this real tight French guy, Boulez, in 1968 and until he got fired in 1977 Boulez wired the whole program with pots and pans and electrolysis.

This is very interesting, the alien said. It seemed in the half-light of the interrogation room to be drained now of malice, to be in the same broken, vulnerable, querulous posture that Winogrand had imagined himselk occupying for most of that miserable decade. Really a strange, a miserable time, perched on his knees, not always metaphorically, waiting for first one humiliation, then the next to softly descend upon him. Wallace lying in the shopping plaza in Maryland in May 1972, shot by Bremer, paralyzed for life two days before Wallace won the Michigan primary anyway and then had to quit the race due to incontinance, paralysis, pain and an understanding of the mortuary arts. A sinkhole, that was what the

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seventies had been, Wallace lying on his back on the stones in the same posture as RFK in that kitchen in Los Angeles and the wife, Cornelia, over him screaming. A missed assassination, though, just like the two attempts on Ford, Fromme and Sarah Jane Moore two months apart in 1975. A cold decade, the seventies, but not as efficient for all of its sleekness, as the sixties. In the sixties people got put down, the seventies though were just for hanging around and around, sometimes until the eighties or even nineties. Bush had been chairman of the Republican National Committee during Watergate at Nixon's behest. McGovern had backed Eagleton a thousand percent in August 1972 when word got out about the shock treatments Eagleton had incurred and then three days later had dumped him from the ticket in favor of Shriver. No, it was not an efficient decade.

It had more bark than bite, though, Winogrand said pointlessly. I mean, you could tough it out, you could get through it. Not like the sixties. The sixties could kind of sneak around and sneak around on you and then burn out your brainpan but even though the seventies started out tougher with that failed *Apollo 13* and the secret bombing of Cambodia, they wimped out in the malaise speech. A clear arc toward extinguishment, Winogrand said. Is there anything else you need to know? Can I go now? Are we finished?

It's hard to understand you people, the interrogator said. You take all of your history so *seriously* and yet nothing happens.

I told you that to start, Winogrand said earnestly. I told you that it was a cold gray time. You said you knew, that everyone else had told you that too. Well, that's what it was. It was a cold gray time. The Oakland A's won three world championships in a row from 1972 through 1974 and then Steinbrenner and Martin and Jackson had the New York Yankee follies in the late seventies so it wasn't *all* a matter of recycling at a lower level. A few things changed. Even I changed, Winogrand said. He could feel the slow throb of change moving within him although maybe it was inertia or a kind of moral paralysis. There was no difference amongst all of these — change, fear, moral paralysis, sexual desire, the whole grabbag of virtues and vices — and that was another thing the seventies had taught him.

Believe me, Winogrand said, you don't want this place. The more you learn about it the less you can see, am I right? I'd like to be excused now.

His interrogator bobbed its tentacles in a way which seemed very much like a shrug of assent although of course, anthropomorphizing was pretty

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much a constant in the alien-human spatial relations which Winogrand had noted. What we can't understand, the interrogator said, taking testimony on this century of yours in decade-long testimony, cutting up the century and trying to get the picture here . . . we simply can't understand how and why you cling to any concept of linearity. Don't you see how disjunctive this is? Yet you seek for connections even when there are no connections.

Well, Winogrand said, and felt the full weight of the century coursing thickly through like sludge, like knowledge, like some river of testimony, well, that's how we were framed. We're a linear race. We believe in chronology. We hold to chronology as if it had consequence. Everyone, Winogrand said, but Nixon that is. I don't think that he's linear which is why he is still around. The shadows poked from the corners of the room, seeming to dazzle in the sudden heat and Winogrand felt himself beginning to slide away, toward a lucid and grateful consciousness. Well thank you, he heard the alien say, thank *you* for your time and trouble. We'll have to consider all of this but I think there's a very good possibility that we want no part of this. None at all. Too much malaise, the alien said. You should talk, Winogrand said and then, sinking into the reconstructed unconsciousness from which time and again they had hauled him, he felt himself on the lip of a profound but casual insight which seemed to wait for him like a net just below that abyss of sleep. *Linear*, he thought, that was the fallacy, and then he was out and the aliens going about their continuing work which consisted of trying to find some way of reordering the century. The trouble was that like a Chinese puzzle, it didn't seem to fit no matter *how* you placed those tubes of the decade. Of their eventual decision, then, the account executive remained blameless.

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"Sinner-Saints" is an alternate history story based on the life of Lillian Hellman. It will also appear later this year in By Any Other Fame *edited by Mike Resnick. Lillian Hellman wrote influential plays for thirty years, beginning with "The Children's Hour" in the 1930s. She associated with a number of writers and "interesting people," including her on-again-off-again lover, Dashiell Hammett. In 1952, she was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee and refused to name names. Blacklisted, penniless, she had to rebuild her career. In the late sixties and seventies, she wrote three fascinating autobiographical books,* Pentimento, An Unfinished Woman, *and* Scoundrel Time. *She was never elected to any government office, but she could have been.*

Sinner-Saints

By Kristine Kathryn Rusch

From the unfinished autobiography of former Senator Lillian Hellman:

HE WAS THE MOST INTERESTING man I've ever met. Even now, decades later, I think about him at the oddest times, when someone mixes a martini or when twilight sun streams in my livingroom window. Some people thought I have not spoken about Dashiell Hammett because I am still keeping secrets too potent to reveal. If I possess secrets, I do not know it. I have not spoken of Hammett because I have too much to say.

We met when I was twenty-four years old and he was thirty-six. I was a rebel who worked as a secretary and had a husband who didn't understand how my rebelliousness leaned toward politics. Hammett was the hottest thing in Hollywood and New York.

It is not unusual to be the hottest thing in either city — the hottest kid changes for each winter season — but in his case it was of extra interest to

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those who collect people that the ex-detective who had bad cuts on his legs and an indentation in his head from being scrappy with criminals was gentle in manner, well educated, elegant to look at, born of early settlers, was eccentric, witty, and spent so much money on women that they would have liked him even if he had been none of those good things. When I met him, he was at the end of a five day drunk and his wonderful face looked rumpled and his tall thin figure was sagged and tired. He spent no money on me. Instead, we wandered out of the restaurant in Hollywood and sat in his car all night, smoking cigarettes and talking of things I can no longer remember.

Sometimes I imagine that night we first spoke of my political career, young as it was, and he told me what he would tell me for years. "There will come a day, Lil, when they will ask you to sell out your friends." The first time he said it, I got angry and swore I would never sell out my friends, and he looked at me with a sadness I only saw in those last days in '61, in the hospital room before he died.

Those words started to haunt me in the spring of 1947 when Truman threw us back into war. J. Edgar Hoover started talking about the Communists as a fifth column, and Truman ordered his Attorney General to draw up a list. The list contained organizations with four ties — Communist, Fascist, totalitarian or subversive views — and membership in one of them would indicate that an applicant for a government job would suffer an investigation. The list was published later in the year, and opened the door for all the civil rights violations that would follow.

But in the early thirties, those far-off days were an unspeakable imagining. Most of the country lived in the deepest Depression the nation had ever seen, and only in a few isolated places — Hollywood being one of them — did people have the money to laugh and drink all night as if the twenties had never ended. I left my husband and moved in with Hammett, and for a few wild and heady years, we acted as if the depression did not exist. Then poverty crept back into my life in the form of ragged children on roadsides, beaten men standing on corners asking for jobs but unwilling to take a nickel from strangers, faded and aging young women begging outside grocery stores for someone to buy their babies milk.

Hammett tossed them money, but I though about other solutions. I had studied in Bonn a few years earlier and the rise of National Socialism out of the economic ruins of Germany frightened me. For the first time I had

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realized I was a Jew. I went home and saw afresh how my Southern family had made its fortune on the backs of poor Negros, and the roots of my rebellion dug deep. Those roots called to me on bright California afternoons as I passed defeated people hunching together in little tent villages.

Hoover made proclamations and did nothing. FDR, then a bright speck on the political horizon, quoted vague ideas that seemed to come from a wealthy man's view of the unfortunate masses. The Republicans had crashed with the market, and the Democrats were glorying in their new position instead of looking for answers. We watched the Spanish Civil War with fascination and dread — perhaps something like that would happen here. Some of Hollywood joined the Communist party. Others spoke of the virtues of Marxism. I remember all night discussions about the need for a third party, one with no ties to any other system.

During one of those all night discussions, a man by the name of Hubert Wallens asked me if I knew how such a party would start. Wallens was a dapper little man whose eyes shifted around the room as I spoke to him. I remember thinking, through the cigarette and alcohol haze, that he was merely biding time with me until someone more important came into his view. Later I learned he did this because he didn't want to miss anything happening around him. In fact, he had absorbed all of our conversation and could repeat it almost to the last word.

He told me he was raising money for a third party presidential bid, and I told him he was wasting his dollars. He would never find the right candidate, the perfect hero for whom the country was looking, and the larger parties would shatter his choice into little pieces. He reminded me that his method had worked in the nineteenth century, and I reminded him that we lived in the twentieth.

Our voices must have carried over the general din of conversation because the room gradually grew quiet. I told him that third parties had to begin with the people and sweep the country, ward by ward, district by district. His money would be better spent financing small heros who could convince small areas that the new party was better. He would have to choose heros who would deliver, whose personal force would gather people around them. He laughed then, and said maybe I had a vision in me after all.

The conversation ended, and others began. I found Hammett at my side, looking serious. He didn't trust politicians. I knew that. Later he would say, when he refused to compromise his principles in a trial that would lead him

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to jail, "I better tell you that if it were more than jail, if it were my life, I would give it for what I think democracy is, and I don't let cops or judges or politicians tell me what I think democracy is."

He was drunk. His eyes had that red-rimmed look and his mouth grew tight. "You walk down this path, Lil, and you can never turn back."

He was right. I never did.

Now when I think of him, standing there beside me, wearing white without a stain on him despite the long-night drunk, I wonder what he was really saying. He was a proud man who asked for nothing, but sometimes in the echoes of his words, I hear the request of a man who never made them. The night before he died, when I visited his hospital room, he reached for me as if he would never let go, and I knew then what I had been too blind to see before, that we were two of a kind and always belonged together. He had known it, and I had not. I had started to spend a lot of time with Wallens in dark rooms and dirty restaurants, plotting, planning. This much money in this ward would bring that result. Hammett disappeared into his book. He wrote the last of his five novels that year, and it wasn't until his final interview, published by the *New York Times* just after his death, that I learned he had modeled Nora Charles on me. It is nice to be Nora, married to Nick Charles, maybe one of the few marriages in modern literature where the man and woman like each other and have a fine time together. Surely the only successful marriage I ever made.

Somehow those discussions in dark rooms turned to running me as a candidate. Wallens thought me perfect. I was outspoken, mannish in my attitudes, but feminine enough to attract the male vote without alienating the female. I hesitated. I had never considered myself a political person. I was more of a rebel.

The final conversation took place at an afternoon party held at a starlet's estate. I had taken my drink beside the pool, preferring to sit in the sun while Hammett and the others argued art in the livingroom. The chlorine scented water shone blue in the bright light. I closed my eyes, tired of conversation and endless parties that went nowhere, when I felt someone sit on the edge of my chair.

"See, Lil," said a voice. It was Wallens. "This life isn't for you. It bores you."

"I'm tired, Hubert," I said.

"You're tempted," he said, and I opened my eyes. With the sun at his

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back and the light framing him, he looked like an angel. A dark angel, I corrected myself and smiled at the reference. He thought that meant I agreed with him. "Lil —"

I raised a hand to silence him. "If I disagree with someone, I'll tell him, Hubert. If I dislike someone, chances are I'll tell him too. If I think someone's policies stink, I say that, in public most likely and at the wrong time."

"Good," he said. "It's time for honesty in politics."

"Honesty and politics don't mix," I said. "I would hate to be the proving ground of an old cliche."

"You're as excited about this as I am," he said. "Why not run with it?"

I closed my eyes and leaned back, unable to respond. He knew me better than I thought. I was excited and tempted and scared. Fear was a great motivator. I was also young. "I'll damage the party."

"You'll help it."

"I'm better behind the scenes."

"We need someone like you out front."

The arguments were no different than they were before. But perhaps discussing them in the light, beside a rich woman's pool, gave them more credence than they had had in dark rooms. I agreed, and felt a little thrill of delight run to my stomach.

Hammett caught my arm after Wallens left and I went inside to replenish my drink. He scanned my face without asking a question. I knew from his expression that he had seen Wallens beside me. "I'm going to do it," I said. "I'm going to run."

He said nothing. I refilled my drink, a little uneasy about his lack of response. The chair beside the pool lost its allure and I wandered through the grounds, alone, thinking about what I had done. I could think of no arguments to change my mind.

Later that evening, Hammett and I had a fight in front of the remaining guests. He said it started because I objected to the way he kissed the starlet. I had seen him kiss other women before and it never bothered me. I do remember screaming about this starlet, but I think I was angry about his silence. In everything else, Hammett had given me total support. In this, he withdrew.

He didn't come home that night, nor the next, nor the next. Sometimes, he and his friends would go on several day drunks, so that was not unusual.

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But he hadn't touched anything heavier than beer since he began the novel, and he had not stayed away at night in nearly a year. By the time he came home, I couldn't decide if I was hysterical with fear or with anger.

He looked as rumpled as he had the day I met him. The twilight sun streaming in from the windows caught him. His white hair, white pants and white shirt made a straight, flat surface. I thought: maybe that's the handsomest sight I ever saw, that line of a man, the knife for a nose, and I yelled at him, "So you're a Dostoevsky sinner-saint. So you are."

He said he didn't know what that meant, and it didn't matter anyway. I could keep the apartment, he said, but he would be moving on.

Moving on, as if I were his starlet, or the women he had talked about when he began to write in the twenties. Maybe he had said that to his wife and two daughters when he left them. Or maybe he had only said it to me.

He took his books and his clothes and a few items of furniture. Not much, perhaps because he thought I had no money, or perhaps because he didn't want it. I said nothing as he left and nothing years afterwards. I sank myself into my campaign with a single-minded zeal I had not realized I was capable of.

And in all those years, in all those campaigns, through all those interviews, no one said a word about Dash.

HE CONTRIBUTED to all of my campaigns even, I later learned, when he had no money to spare. Over the years, he finished the novel, wrote screenplays, and then stopped writing at all. The party grew — especially in California — and I moved from the House to the Senate with a small group of like-minded people following me up the ranks. I was as outspoken as I had warned Wallens I would be, and usually he tolerated it, although he didn't like it as much as he thought he would. Still, I had a constituency, and the press liked me, and there was even talk, in those early days, of running me to be the first female President.

In 1941, the war came, as I had been fearing since I saw the National Socialist banners in Bonn. I supported a strike against the Nazi evil and my vehemence startled my friends but I remembered how it felt to walk the streets of a city and be conscious that I was a Jew. I heard the stories, unsubstantiated, of camps and prisons and Krystalnachts, and I decided that fascism had to stop, even if I wasn't certain of the methods.

I had returned to California for town meetings when an old friend told

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me Hammett was being shipped out in a few days. I was shocked and assumed that a bureaucratic mistake had caused a forty-eight-year-old man to fight in a war designed for the young. He was still living in the old neighborhood. Going to see him was like stepping back in time. I almost pulled the shabby door open, and stepped inside, removing my gloves and shoes and settling into a chair before lighting a cigarette.

But I did not. I rapped on the door firmly, the sound muted by my gloves, adjusted my hat like a school girl and wished for the old familiarity. I didn't like the nerves that tickled at my throat. I blamed them on thirst. When the door opened, Hammett stood before me, still thin, still handsome, eyes twinkling as if I had been the one on the two-day drunk.

"The clothes suit you, Lil," he said as he pulled open the door.

I stepped inside and removed my hat before I thought about it. The room was cluttered with books and old magazines. Gadgets of all sizes and in all states of repair leaned against the undecorated walls. Hammett lived alone. The possessions told me that. I had never expected it of him.

We had not spoken since the day he left. The old hurt was there, throbbing like a reopened wound. I longed to shout at him and have him shout back — to know that all was right in the world again.

He pulled books off a metal kitchen chair, and I sat on it, feeling prim. We stared at each other for a few minutes, unwilling to say the cliches of old lovers. Then he took a chair himself.

"So what exactly did you mean," he asked, "Dostoevsky sinner-saint?"

I told him I didn't know, and maybe at that point, I didn't. I did later, when I realized the sinning had passed — whatever sinning was — and he became the Hammett of his final years. I tried then to explain it to him, but he said it was all too religious for him.

His question wiped away the barriers and made me want to ask my own question, the one that had haunted me since he told me he was going to move on. A little plaintive whine played in my head, begging to know why he had left, what had caused him to close the door behind us. I said nothing. Hammett knew that I wanted to know. He would tell me when he was ready.

"I heard you're shipping out soon," I said, pulling off my gloves. The gesture was that of a genteel Southern Lady, a pose I adopted when I was nervous. "You know you don't have to go, Dash. I can fix whatever bureaucratic error caused the problem."

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Color suffused his face, then faded, followed by an all-too-familiar smile. "No error, Lil," he said. "I enlisted."

"What?" The genteel Southern Lady was gone. In her place, the brash and brassy woman with whom Hammett had fallen in love. "You're too old, Dash. Let the children fight this war. We need you at home."

At first I thought my outburst didn't disturb him. Then he stood up and his hands were shaking. "Need me for what, Lil? To write war propaganda for the moving pictures? To show the young enlistees what kind of future they can hope for?"

"What about the scars on your lungs?" Scars he had gotten in the First World War, battling tuberculosis.

He shrugged and smiled and poured me a drink. I didn't take it. "That fire serves you well on the Hill."

"Dash, I can't let you."

The laughter stopped. He set the bottle down, looked at me with a look I hope no one ever uses on me again, and said, "I never expected you to say that."

I had been prepared to pull every string I had to keep him stateside, to keep him out of the shooting and the fighting even before I knew where he was going to go. His look made me feel like a wayward child who had disappointed an indulgent parent.

"I enlisted, the army accepted me, and I'm going to go. You can't stop me, Lil. You have no right."

I pulled my gloves back on and grabbed for my hat. My response had startled me. I spent my entire career defending the rights of people who had none and I was about to take away the rights of a forty-eight-year-old man all because I loved him. Still. "I have to go."

"Like hell," he said.

"I have meetings."

"Meetings be damned if they lead you to think you can screw with someone else's life."

He was right and I didn't know how to tell him. I could only think of getting out of the room. "I made a mistake."

"That's right," he said. "And you're going to stay here until we make sure you're not going to make that mistake again."

It took Wallens two days and half a dozen missed meetings to find me. The old gang was gone, but the all-night discussions were the same.

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Hammett had a touch of tenderness I had forgotten, or perhaps it had appeared in the years we were apart. When Wallens called, Hammett let me go with a wave and smile, and no discussion about whether I would ever be back.

Soon after that, the first reporters asked questions. Wallens smelled a scandal — "How could you have lived with him without marrying him, Lillian?" "I was already married at the time, Hubert." — but it got buried under the weight of the war. Hammett was a war hero, even though he never fought on any front, just the idea that a man like him would enlist was enough. And I had other battles to fight in the Senate, battles that were more important than a decade-old relationship and the mistakes of a young girl.

He sent me letters from the Aleutian Islands. I have many letters describing their beauty and for years he talked about going back to see them again. He conducted a training program there for a while and edited a good army newspaper: the copy was clean, the news was accurate, and the jokes were funny. I never knew what attracted a man like him to the army. Maybe it gave him, a man who never sought out other people, a place. Maybe he felt a sense of pride that a man of forty-eight could keep pace with boys half his age. Or maybe he liked his country and felt this was a just war and had to be fought.

I never asked Hammett about his politics. It seems odd, I suppose, considering how much happened because of them. But in the early years, we discussed my political changes and in the later years, I no longer felt the need to ask. What had happened had changed us; we could not go back. I do not know if Hammett was a Communist Party member. I do think he was a Marxist. But he was a very critical Marxist, often critical of the Soviet Union in the same hick sense that many Americans are critical of foreigners. I know that, whatever he believed in, whatever he arrived at, came from reading and thinking. He took time to find out what he thought, and he had an open mind and a tolerant nature.

When we won the war, I believed that we had vanquished evil and the world was a rosy place. Perhaps that was a product of the times. I had enough knowledge of human nature to know that each of us carries our own contradictions, our own good and evil views, Dostoevsky sinner-saints on the small view, and I was fooling myself that tickertape parades and dead dictators could make up for willful American ignorance about

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death camps and Asian cities destroyed by a single bomb dropped from a great height. I rode in those parades and made speeches about the glories of our country and saw Hammett once after he returned.

He had a wildness I had never seen before, and a way of looking through me that I didn't like, and we fought about my speeches and his enlistment and we both went away sour. The memories of the days before the war were overshadowed by the new fight and the drinking.

Those weren't the only shadows. The Attorney General's list and Alger Hiss rose like specters on the collective horizon. I spoke out against them, but no longer had my fingers on the pulse. The letters from my constituents grew angry and frustrated. They wanted our party to disavow any ties with other third parties, including the Communist Party from which many of our early members had come. I refused. I found myself repeating many times during those days that I could not and would not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions.

The test of that statement came when Hammett went to prison in 1951. He and two other trustees of the bail bond fund of the Civil Rights Congress refused to reveal the names of the contributors to that fund. He was prosecuted for withholding information, but the truth was that Hammett had never been to the Congress's offices, and didn't know the name of a single contributor. It was his particular honor that led him to jail, and his particular honor that opened the door to all that was to follow.

Even though Hammett had written little in the last decade, the memory of his days as the hottest thing in New York and Hollywood had not faded. Reporters questioned him and his trial was big news in all the major papers. And then someone remembered the rumors about me.

The information wasn't hard to find. Hammett and I had lived together twenty years before. Sometimes we acted like a married couple and sometimes we acted like roommates. In those days, when everyone would testify to anything to avoid being destroyed by a congressional committee, no one had to lie about the fact that Dashiell Hammett and I had once had a strong and passionate relationship.

But now the press wanted to know if Hammett was a communist and if I had ever "harbored" him. The rumors were thick and damaging. Wallens called for a meeting. His offices, as the head of the party, were also in Washington, up a long windy stairway in one of the older buildings just down from the embassies. I hated going up there and would often

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complain that I felt as if I were going to see a Mafia don. Wallens smiled at the comparison, and toward the end, I always felt as if I wanted him to deny it.

That afternoon, he poured me a drink before talking with me. His office had no window and was dominated by a huge leather chair that a patron had given him years before. The chair even dwarfed his desk. He had a liquor cabinet off to the side, built with mahogany, just like his bookcases, and the crystal glasses were more for show then for sharing. So when he reached for them, I knew the discussion would be serious.

"Tell me about Hammett, Lil," he said as he handed me my glass.

I continued standing. The pictures decorating the office caught my eye. Wallens and I at a party fund-raiser. Wallens sitting before a congressional committee. Wallens with FDR. Wallens with Truman. Wallens shaking the hand of Churchill. We had come a long way, Wallens and I. "Dash is in jail."

"I know," he said. He perched on the edge of his expensive desk. Funny how I had never questioned his money or the party's backing before. "I mean, what can you tell me about your relationship with Hammett?"

"You know about my relationship with Dash. I was living with him when you and I met."

"Yes, and we've managed to keep that quiet until now."

I remember thinking that I didn't want the surprise I felt to show on my face. I didn't know this man. I had worked with him for two decades, started a political movement with him, but I didn't know him. "I haven't kept anything quiet," I said.

"Who have you told?" His face held a kind of alarm.

"Until recently, no one has asked. The information is private, so I haven't said anything. But I don't keep things quiet, Hubert. You know that."

He knew that but had forgotten it, or had chosen to forget it. He downed his drink so fast I thought he was going to choke. "I think we need to keep it quiet now, Lil," he said. "Or it will kill us. You, me, the party, everything we've worked for."

"If I lie to protect everything we've worked for, then it's all gone anyway," I said. "We started this to be different, and I warned you that I was outspoken. The party is based on honesty. What makes you think I can lie?"

"It will make no difference to Hammett," Wallens said, and his voice

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had a whine I had never heard before. This was what powerful men sounded like when they begged. "He's already in jail."

"And what happens when he gets out? When someone with photographs or proof shows him that I have denied a relationship that once meant something to both of us. It cheapens me, Hubert. It cheapens the party. And it cheapens what Hammett and I had."

"What did you have, Lil?" Wallens asked, face studying the drops remaining in his tumbler. "He left when you decided to become your own woman."

"He did, didn't he." I felt around my heart the old wound I had had those days with Hammett before the war, when I let myself believe that our separation hadn't mattered, that time, patience and a bit of healing would reconcile us again. In that moment, I understood the fear and bitterness that made people sell out their friends, sell out their beliefs, to protect themselves. "But that changes nothing, Hubert. It happened. And I will not lie and say it didn't."

"Think about it," he said. "Talk to me in the morning."

"In the morning," I said. "I will not have changed my mind."

I left my drink untouched on his desk and walked down those long gloomy stairs. My feet tapped a rhythm on the wood and with each beat, I heard his demands over and over. What had caused us to go from that jubilation I had felt at the end of the war to this paranoia? What had caused Wallens to cave in to it? And what was causing me to listen to him?

By the time I reached the street I knew that I would need some other solution. The questions about Hammett would surface again and again, and I needed an answer or at least an attitude.

I thought about writing to Hammett, for he was the wisest man I knew. But he was in prison and his mail was censored, and all I needed was for some prison warden with dreams of fame to publish our mail. Still, I was angry at Hammett for his stubbornness. If he had told the truth about the bail bondsmen he wouldn't be in jail and I wouldn't be struggling with this dilemma on my own. But if he had told the truth about the bail bondsmen, he wouldn't have been Hammett.

Funny how I felt I needed him then, even though I had struggled through other difficult questions on my own. Perhaps it was because I had been defending him or perhaps because his words were haunting me, his words on my post-war speeches, on the inevitability of the road I walked, on

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betrayal: *There will come a day, Lil, when they will ask you to sell out your friends.*

The day had come, a day I had been too naive to believe in.

I didn't sleep the night I saw Wallens. Instead, I wandered around my Georgetown apartment, staring at the city lights and letting my thoughts drift. In addition to Hammett's statements about loyalty, I heard my own voice claiming boldly that I did not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions. And Hammett again, just before he went to jail, telling me that no cop or judge or politician would tell him what democracy was. No one would tell me either.

I knew that my decision would destroy the party. And I knew it would destroy my political career. But since I had discussed it with no one and since I had no backing but my own conscience, I never realized the difficulties buried in such a decision. I had always considered myself a smart and honest woman who would do what she must in difficult times. I dedicated myself to truth and sense in all things. I helped what people I could, gave back what things I could, and made policy based on my beliefs. Hammett once called me a Jeffersonian politician — one who believed not so much in the leadership of the people, but in the people's ability to choose someone with the moral courage to represent their interests. Few such Jeffersonians were left. And even fewer stood up on the Hill.

The next morning, I called a press conference. We held it in the press room on the Hill and every reporter in town appeared on very short notice. I read a prepared statement that not even my staff had seen. It was short and I had memorized it, so that I could see the faces around me as I spoke.

"In the last week, you have asked me many questions about my past. I have not answered, because in these times, an answer is often taken as a confession to a crime no one understands. I have never lied about my life. Indeed, I am proud of most of it. The way I lived before I went into public life created the politician I now am. That is, I think, a good thing."

Wallens slipped in the back of the room. His face was white, but he nodded as I spoke and I assumed I was on the right track. The reporters were scribbling furiously and beneath the podium, tape recorders whirred. A few flashbulbs went off in my face.

"Many of you have asked about my relationship with Dashiell Hammett. I cannot describe it to you because I cannot describe it to myself. We shared a home in the early thirties after I had left my husband and we had a

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friendship that remains, to me, special. Beyond that, I will not discuss him because you want to know about his political views and the only political views I understand are my own."

Wallens no longer looked pale, he looked sick. He leaned against the wall for support. The reporters continued scribbling. I felt as if I were lecturing a class.

I stepped back from the podium and instantly a dozen voices shouted "Senator! Senator!" For a moment, I thought of ignoring the questions, but decided that was cowardly. I had set my ground rules. I would stick to them.

The questions flew like spitballs. I could not see who fired them.

"Was Dashiell Hammett your lover?"

"Aren't you still married, Senator?"

"Are you advocating living in sin?"

"Did you know he was a Communist when you met him?"

"When will you purge your party of its 683 Communist members?"

I had stood silent before the podium, letting the questions pelt me. I did not duck, but I had no response to most of them. Finally, I heard a question I could answer.

"Are you a Communist, Senator?"

The questioner was a new, young reporter for the *New York Times*. He later became the head of his own paper and pretended he had been a liberal his entire life. I would remind him of his anti-Communist leanings in the fifties, and he would leave me alone. Now he stood in front of me, young and brash and full of his position as a cub at the *Times*. His black hair tumbled into his eyes and his sleeves were rolled above the elbow. He leaned forward with an eagerness of a dog at the hunt.

I ignored the other questioners and stared at him. "I am not a Communist," I said. "Nor have I ever been one. There is no communist menace in this country and you know it. You have made cowards into liars, an ugly business, and the things our country stands for and fought for in a war not ten years gone have disintegrated into the petty squabblings of frightened children. The search for a Communist under each rock and bushel will destroy us as quickly as an atomic bomb dropped overhead. And you who report these stories with the glee of slavering dogs are as guilty of that destruction as my colleagues in Congress who do not know that the business of running a government includes the concepts of justice, honesty and fairness no matter what a person's political stripe."

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In the silence that followed, Wallens disappeared out the back door. The reporters stared at me, reprimanded only momentarily. Then hands went up and the cries of Senator! Senator! began again. I stepped away from the podium, for good this time, and walked off the stage.

What I remember of the next few hours has blurred with time and pressure. People I never expected — silent Congressmen and Senators — patted me on the back and thanked me for speaking out. Richard Nixon pointedly avoided me in the halls.

The headlines were grand — HELLMAN SPEAKS OUT FOR FREEDOM. SENATOR FIGHTS BACK. COMMUNISTS NOT A MENACE, SENATOR SAYS — but they lasted a mere heartbeat before the fight began again. Old pictures of me with Hammett graced the front page of the *Times* with my young friend's byline on the stories, claiming that I had accompanied Hammett to Communist Party meetings. More and more of my friends appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee and more and more of them lied when pressed — yes, I saw Lillian Hellman at a Communist Party rally. Yes, I saw Lilly flash her Communist Party card. I did not know I had liked so many cowards. Wallens publicly denounced me, and in the fall elections, the voters denounced me too.

THE DAYS were empty. I did not retire, an elder statesman, as I had once thought my due. No one spoke to me about Washington or the Communist menace. I bought a farm in New England and retired there, away from the crowds.

Hammett sent me a letter. Two confusing sentences that I stared at for days before I finally set it aside. *I'm sorry, Lil. I should have trusted your strength.*

I did not see him again until the week before his death, although we corresponded through the remaining years. That week he was too tired for meaningful conversation and, I think, we saw no need for it. A mutual friend had told me he was alone in the hospital, his daughters refusing to come although they were paying the bill, and I went not knowing what I would find.

Disease had blunted the knife-edged handsomeness and his eyes were dulled by pain. His grip on mine was stronger than I expected. We spoke little and what we did say was of old times, of good times, when we were young. The stories had the feeling of code, the kind an old married couple

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uses when the tales have been remade into comforting legend. We pretended that we had had more of a life together than apart.

He died, his grip still tight upon my hand.

His daughters let me go through his papers. I found among them a scrap I thought an excised part of a story. I later realized it was part of a journal he kept on random slips of papers, scattered throughout his manuscripts. The date on it marked from the night he left me.

> *Maybe the way she was looking when I walked out the door made me reconsider. That little lost stare on a face that had never looked lost before. I almost went back inside. But I knew if I did that, everything she wanted would disappear or I would kill it, just by my presence. She wouldn't have to betray me. We would betray ourselves.*

He had moved on because he thought our relationship would kill my dreams. Or maybe he was less noble than that. Maybe by not trusting my strength, he failed to believe that I would defend him — defend us — when the time came. Maybe he was afraid that my life as a politician would offend his sense of democracy.

I sat in his office which smelled of sickness and pipe smoke and Hammett and clutched that piece of paper so hard my thumb pierced it through. Our silences — the perfect understandings of Nick and Nora Charles — transformed into unspoken needs and wants and led to a misunderstanding that resulted in three decades apart instead of three decades together.

When I think of Hammett, I think not of the fights nor the silences but of the longing I felt sitting across the table in his sloppy kitchen, my gloves and hat beside me, a glass of scotch in my hand. I wanted to breach the distance between us, but instead we danced and played and argued about things that mattered only on the periphery and not inside.

The paper sits beside me now, my rip an angry scar along its bottom. His letter beside it, another silent request from a man who never made them, a request I did not understand. I want to shake him for taking care of me, yell at him for not asking what I wanted, hold him as tightly as, in the end, he held me.

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The distance remains, and the longing remains, and the silence remains. Forever.

Author's Note: Some of the quotes about Dashiell Hammett are found in Lillian Hellman's autobiographic books *Scoundrel Time* and *An Unfinished Woman.*

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Esther M. Friesner returns with a nasty little story. "I got the idea," she writes, "during the family Passover seder. When you watch the movie, 'The Ten Commandments,' you only see how the highest of the high reacted to events preceding the Exodus. But what about the ordinary people!" The answer rests in "One Quiet Day in the Suburbs."

One Quiet Day in the Suburbs

By Esther M. Friesner

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL MORNING. Then Dad ruined it by coming into my room and saying, "Get up, sleepyhead. There's plenty of yardwork to be done."

"No, there isn't," I replied, trying to curl up so small I'd vanish. "It's too dark to work, remember?"

"That's all you know about it, sonny-boy," Dad said, whacking me on the rump. I hate it when he gets jovial. He thinks it makes him sound like my best buddy. He doesn't know he comes off like an asshole. "You just take a look outside and you tell me."

I didn't have much choice, so I did what he told me. The darkness was gone, all right. Damn.

"Yessir, it's a fine day for a man to catch up on his yardwork," Dad said, slapping me on the back. "Come on, it'll be fun, and it won't take long; you'll see."

I guess he was right about some of it. Yardwork's never fun, but at least there wouldn't be too much to do. There couldn't be, not after the locusts.

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They finished off pretty much every sprig of green that survived the hail and the thunderbolts. Our yard looked like someone had gone over it with an army of razor-toting cows.

"Hey! Look who's up!" Dad waved to our neighbor, who was also out early. His son was with him, and the kid looked almost as thrilled as me to be there. We all ambled over to the fence for a little chat. I mean the fathers chatted; I can't stand the neighbor's son and he hates me, too. That's okay, except the big bastard thinks he's got to prove how much he hates me by whipping the crap out of me every chance he gets.

"Hot enough for you?" He sounded real jovial.

"Yeah, well, I can't complain. You know how it is these days," Our neighbor waved a hand at his own devastated yard.

Dad let out a low whistle. "I suppose we ought to be grateful; it could've been worse. So how's the missus?"

"Oh, you know her, any excuse to lie around the house, doing nothing. She swears she's still covered with boils. If that's the case, they're the first invisible boils I've ever seen." Both men laughed. "And how's the little woman?"

Dad shook his head. "She misses that dog of hers something terrible."

"Her dog died? That cute little greyhound?" Our neighbor clucked his tongue. "That's a dirty shame. When did it happen?"

"Right around the time we started having all that trouble with the cattle. Maybe the beast caught it from them, who knows?"

"I always heard that murrain only attacked cows. A *greyhound*?"

Dad shrugged. "Who knows from murrain these days? Greyhound, cattle, nothing on four feet was safe. A man works hard for a living, and then — *pow*! — murrain. And as usual, the government didn't do a damn thing about it."

"They never do. Call it 'divine intervention' and go wait for the problem to go away, that's their style."

Dad leaned farther over the fence and dropped his voice real low, like he and the neighbor were big deal spies hatching a plot or something. "I'd like to see what those government boys would say if next time they want my tax money I tell 'em they're not gonna get it on account of 'divine intervention!'" They laughed some more, then slowly got serious again.

"What a world, what a world," Dad said, shaking his head. "When it comes right down to it, all a man's got to count on is family." He put his arm

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around me, even though the day was starting to heat up and we were already getting sweaty without having done any work yet. "Remember when we had all those damned flies everywhere and all the government could do was tell us to be patient while they bitched and moaned about 'labor troubles'? Well, I don't know how I would've managed without the boy, here, to help me kill all the ones that got into the house."

"Ha! You're telling me? Why, even before the flies, when you couldn't take a breath without sucking up a noseful of gnats, this big fella right here helped me cover all our windows with netting." Our neighbor aped Dad's chummy gesture, slinging his arm around his son's shoulders and squeezing until the kid yelped and squirmed free.

"I don't like to brag, but you know what my boy did about those vermin?" Dad said proudly. "He was the only one I ever heard of with brains enough to suggest we save a bunch of frogs from before 'just in case'. I thought it was some silly kid-thing, although I was willing enough to let him have his way until he got tired of them and they died. My wife couldn't stand the slimy things — threatened to pack up and move out! — but she sang another tune when she saw how they gobbled up those gnats and the flies, too!"

"Well, I'll be." Our neighbor was impressed. I decided not to say how the idea for holding onto the frogs wasn't mine; it was my best friend Seth's. Then our neighbor turned to his son and demanded, "Why couldn't *you* think of something that simple?" I could tell from the dirty look the kid shot me that maybe the idea was Seth's, but the beating was going to be all mine.

Dad planted his hands on his hips. "Well, this is as nice a conversation as I've enjoyed in awhile, but we're not going to get anything at all done this morning if we don't stop jawing and start working."

"Right you are," our neighbor agreed. "Best get on with the watering if we ever expect to see some green around here again."

They sent us kids down to the river for the water, of course. There was plenty in the house cisterns, but I heard how none of the moms in our neighborhood was letting any man near them. The women all said that the time the house water got red and stinky was because either the kids or the husbands were fooling around with it. I heard Dad up half the night, arguing with Mom that the water was the same all over, even the river. She just said, "Leave it to you men to screw up everything." Dad said it was all

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the government's fault, but he still made me go to the river to get water for the yardwork.

The neighbor's kid kept poking me and slapping me all the way down to the bank. "I bet there's a big fat ol' crocodile just waiting there for you," he sneered. "I'm gonna make sure he don't go home hungry."

I didn't say anything because I knew the least little bit of backtalk I gave him would be his excuse to pick me up and throw me into the water. I tried walking faster, but he walked faster too. Somewhere along the road he found a stick and used that to flick my shoulders. The whole time he kept flicking me and taunting me with stuff like, "Got any more bright ideas for how to get out of *this*, gnatbrain?"

By the time we reached the river, my back was stinging worse than when I had the boils. I don't know, maybe it was the heat and the dust and the sweat and the thought of that pile of yardwork waiting for me, but all of a sudden I couldn't take it any more.

"You stupid hippo!" I yelled at him. "You cut that out!" And I turned around real fast and grabbed the stick out of his hands and smacked him with it good right upside the head.

He just stood there staring at me for what seemed like forever. There was a jagged tear across his face that seemed to open up right in front of my eyes. It ran from his cheek to his temple, all red and sticky-looking, like the little streams got, that time all the moms were so pissed off about the house water. His jug fell from his hands and rolled into the river with a big splash, then he sort of folded over at the waist and the shoulders and the knees and lay there.

"Shit," I said. "Oh, *shit*!" I dropped the stick.

The reeds along the river rustled behind me. There weren't many left after the locusts, but enough to hide something big and mean and hungry. I grabbed the stick again, like I was really going to be able to fight off a croc or a hippo or a hyena or something with some stupid piece of wood. Then the reeds parted and I saw my best friend Seth looking at me and the neighbor's kid and going, "Oh, wow."

So we sort of decided that I'd go sleep over at Seth's house until Dad and Mom and the neighbors had a chance to chill out. "It's not like you killed him or anything," Seth said as we made tracks for Goshen.

"You sure you wouldn't want to say you did it?" I suggested. "I mean, you're used to getting whipped. With a real whip, I mean."

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"Yeah, suuuuure I'll say I did it. Riiiight. Hey, I'm a slave, but I'm not stupid." He punched me in the arm, but it was okay; not like how the neighbor's kid did it.

"Just asking," I said.

When we got to Seth's house, his dad was out in front smearing the doorpost and lintels with blood. "Can I have my friend stay over?" Seth asked.

"Ask your mother," his dad said. He went back to smearing on the blood. Grownups are weird.

Seth's Mom said that on account of how Seth's dad had just killed a lamb it was okay if I stayed for dinner and slept over after. We had stewed lamb and lentils — both pretty good — and I didn't want to say anything but the flatbread Seth's mom served really sucked. Even Seth looked at it funny. I guess he was embarrassed, because he told me it was different from the stuff she made on other nights. It was a good thing I was sleeping over because I drank four cups of wine with dinner and I couldn't have found my way home after if you paid me.

Seth and his family were slaves, so we all slept in the same room, and that was pretty much the whole house. They couldn't even afford the oil to keep a night-lamp burning, which was too bad for me, alone in the dark in a strange place with just the bad feelings about what I'd done to the neighbor's kid to keep me company.

There was only one window, a teeny little slot high up the wall. From where I lay, I could just peek out at a sliver of stars. The way my head was spinning from all that wine, the night sounded full of whirring wings rushing through the air. It was kind of soothing to listen to, you know? Like the times Dad would take out his whetstone and make it go *wht-wht-wht-wht*, sharpening up his scythe.

Dad would forgive me. He'd yell at me at first — more on account of my running away and sleeping over at Seth's than on account of what I did to the neighbor's kid — but in the end he'd forget the whole thing. Deep down, he'd be proud I stood up for my rights. He always said there's only one thing bullies understand, and that's a good, hard lesson. I bet he'd even make a joke about it, eventually. I mean, like Seth said, it's not like anybody was *dead* or anything.

I closed my eyes and let the night sounds carry me away to sleep. With luck, everything would be different in the morning.

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Marc Laidlaw's newest novel, Kalifornia, *has just appeared from St. Martin's Press. Marc lives in California now, but he went to school in Eugene, Oregon (home of F&SF's editorial offices) and he used that quiet city and the lovely University of Oregon as the basis for fictional Spencer. Marc takes the Oregon music scene (and there is quite a large one, thank you very much) and combines it with everything Mom and Dad feared about rock 'n' roll. Add a international star named Holly Terror and one crazed fan to the mix and the result is "Terror's Biggest Fan."*

Terror's Biggest Fan

By Marc Laidlaw

RUNICK SHOVED A ROLLED-up towel against the bottom of the door to keep the smell of pot out of his room; it filled the corridor with a sickly scent and made him ill at ease, a distraction where he was going. He drew the curtains to shut out the gray October light, cutting off his sight of the campus paths, students rushing everywhere in a light rain. He would shut out that world for as long as he could. It took an additional effort to ignore the stack of textbooks teetering on his little built-in desk, especially since they were in the way of the stereo. He dropped a Holly Terror album on the turntable, then fit a pair of hugely padded headphones over his ears, shutting out all sounds but the soft crackling, like footsteps in pine needles, that always filled him with anticipation. He lay down on his bed, folded his hands over his chest, and shut his eyes.

The first notes, as always, summoned feelings of dread. The music made a choked path into darkness, little-traveled. Of him it made a shadow sweeping down into a black place. His return was a moment of fear, despite his great joy.

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He used to think he was entering the groove itself, that he was becoming microscopic, smaller than the needle's head, descending into the track. But no vinyl groove could have been so overgrown with brambles, its steepening sides edged far above with tottering rocks like decayed molars. Thick pine branches crowded out the sky, clawed at the stars, blotted out their light — as all the while he swept down faster, borne by the music and his own black wings. He himself was dread now, pure terror. This valley was his hunting ground, a fissure between the hemispheres of his brain, the place he went when he had to get away.

Deeper, darker, faster, as the music built and fed his power, welcoming him home. The darkness was impregnable. All around him, the black faces of his brethren stirred and squirmed invisibly, their open mouths waiting for any morsel he might drop to them.

And then, right on cue, the light appeared.

Far ahead of him, growing slowly, a spark of brightness, a flame drawing him, a star —

A voice.

He was unable to check his swooping flight, his headlong plunge, unable to hold back his all-smothering blackness from extinguishing that tiny spark. It grew in size and clarity as he swept toward it — brighter, louder, the words coming clear though his mind refused to admit them. He must quench the spark. The power to do so was his alone. Despite some reluctance, it was necessary to complete the darkness of his mind, to preserve the utter purity of the music, which shaped the silence of this valley.

He spread his wings and the spark trembled, expanding. Suddenly he saw the face of Holly Terror caught in a sourceless spotlight, her jet-black hair with one white streak flying around her alabaster face. He stretched to spill out all the passion he held back, and knew that it was his love that allowed him to murder her — for without her he was incomplete. Without her presence he had no reason to be here. What good is darkness without a light to quench?

Eagerly, he bent to snuff her.

Suddenly his wings were torn away, a light most drab and ordinary fouled his eyes, and Holly was gone, her voice snatched from his ears, her life from his black enveloping fingers.

"Runick! Guess what!"

He came awake clenched in fetal posture, uncurling as his roommate

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Nevis tore off the headphones that were Runick's umbilicus to that dark womb of fear. Nevis, who should have been gone for the day, threw open the curtains and dropped down on the opposite bed with that taunting grin that was his usual expression, and not to be taken personally.

"You're not gonna believe this. She's back in town."

"Who?" Runick whispered, far from acclimated to this bright and ugly place.

"Who? What do you mean, who? Is there any other 'she' in your vocabulary? Holly Terror, stupid. Unless you've got a girl nobody knows about."

Runick sat up, got to his feet, turned to the door and then back to Nevis. "How do you know?"

"Miller's girlfriend works at the airport rent-a-car. She just saw her there. You wanna bet she's gonna do a concert? One for the old hometown?"

Runick sank back onto the bed, in shock, unsure of what action he should take — if any. His grief was almost immeasurable. He should have been delirious, but there were so many others here who had a claim on Holly Terror. He was nothing to her, just a face in the crowd despite the power of his visions and the feeling he had when he was with her in that dark valley, swooping down to blow her out with the certain knowledge that he had total control of her life and death. But that was just a dream, a fantasy. What did it matter to Holly that he had seen every concert she'd played in Portland since he was fifteen, that he'd played her records a thousand times? He was just one among many.

"What's wrong, Runick? I thought you'd be stoked."

He shrugged. "It is good news."

"So come on, time for action. We'll track her down. Spencer's such a small town, she can't hide for long. Her sister still lives on the outskirts —I'll bet that's the place to start. Come on, Runick, you're up for it, aren't you?"

He hauled himself unwillingly toward the window. Every step into that world took him farther from the black valley where his true power lay; farther from that brilliant spark that was his alone to fan or quench; farther from the ultimate darkness. Yet the world was irresistible, and despite himself he felt the birth of new hopes. He couldn't just lie here listening to unchanging music, a dead voice, when the living one was near.

"All right," he said, "I'm coming."

"How could you resist, Runick? This is your time to shine!"

* * *

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Holly was in England when the band broke up, each member spinning off in separate directions like the skirling notes of their final act. She was close to Wales, her mother's home, so it seemed natural that she should seek a new start there now that the structure she'd spent the last ten years perfecting had cracked wide open. The Welsh hills reminded her of Oregon, in that they were green and damp, but there were constant reminders that this was not home, that she was an alien here. The landscape was sleeping, uneasy in its slumber, and she knew that it would never wake for her, nor wake the things inside her that she needed to discover. Sitting upstairs in an inn, watching the rain rush down on a gunmetal river and into the sea, she realized that nothing kept her here except her own indecision. She was used to coordinating her plans with five others. The time had come to chart her own path.

By nightfall she was in a jet above the dark Atlantic. She called her manager from Kennedy Airport to tell him she was heading back to Oregon for a rest before making any new plans. She expected him to pressure her at least obliquely to stop off in L.A. first; instead he read a week-old telegram from her sister Heather, three words: *"Emergency. Come home."*

Circling Spencer Airport prior to landing, she wondered what kind of emergency Heather could have meant. Their mother's death two years before had prompted no such message. It had taken three weeks for the news to reach Holly, and not because the band was touring in Europe at the time. Heather hadn't considered it an emergency, after so many years of illness.

The Willamette River glinted below the plane, catching a glimpse of the sun. She and Heather had stood on a bridge above that river and opened the canister from the crematorium, scattering not ashes but heat-fused lumps more like porcelain. In her quavering voice, Heather had sung a few lines of a song Holly had never heard before or since, and that was the extent of the ceremony.

If Heather hadn't considered that an emergency, then what could have alarmed her now? When Holly called from Portland to let her know she was almost home, Heather had refused to elaborate on the telegram. She'd sounded anxious, worse than ever. Holly wondered how long she'd be able to stand her weird sister this time.

The town of Spencer had been swept by an orange brush, though the dark green of wet grass and pine still prevailed. The airport lay amid an ugly

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sprawl of agricultural industry, ranks of tractors and dairy trucks. The plane touched down hard.

Heather wasn't waiting, but Holly hadn't expected her. Her older sister had no sense of direction, and had often gotten lost on foot in her hometown. Heather had spent her entire life within the span of a few square miles; and she was uncomfortable with most of those except the interior and immediate surroundings of the old house. Holly had traveled all over the world since she turned seventeen, yet she often thought that it was Heather's mind that roamed the farthest; in her imagination she certainly ventured to stranger places than Holly ever dared.

She rented a car, and on the drive into town got a glimpse of the campus through the autumn oaks. For most people, spending a few years here as students, these were the strongest memories of Spencer that they would carry away. Holly hadn't gone to college, here or anywhere. It was the broad, quiet avenues beyond the school that meant the most to her. Huge ivy-wrapped manors on manicured lawns, stone walls and empty parks where she had wandered and played as a child. These were memories not even Heather shared, housebound Heather with her books and poetry, who never went much farther than the woods behind their house.

Away from campus, the houses thinned out and the streets grew narrower; the hills were densely covered with trees. An assault of housing tracts had failed when the lumber industry took heavy blows from environmentalists and Spencer's economy had collapsed to its current poor condition. It was hard to see now where the land had ever been cleared for new housing. On the winding approach to her house, the woods seemed thicker than she remembered. She came suddenly around a curve and saw the place, shrunken and yellow as a plant raised in a cellar. Something even paler moved across a window. It was Heather.

Her sister stood inside the doorway watching Holly unload two heavy bags and come up the path through a chill rain. They brushed cheeks in the hallway. The house smelled like mold and crumbling rock; its dampness told her that the furnace hadn't yet been used this year. No trace of her mother remained to haunt the house, as had happened on her last visit. She wasn't sure what the mildew reminded her of.

Heather shut the door and faced her with a pinched expression, her shoulders hunched up, her white hair falling limp across her face.

"You want coffee, I suppose." She pushed past Holly, toward the kitchen.

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"Thanks. I'll just take these upstairs."

There was no welcome in her bedroom either. The bed was freshly made up, but the walls and shelves were bare. She remembered telling Heather to do what she wished with the room, but she hadn't expected her simply to empty it. It was freezing upstairs, damper than below. She dug a sweater out of her luggage and tried the thermostat, without result.

Heather was pouring water into two mugs when Holly came back into the kitchen.

"Do you always keep it so cold?"

"I don't notice. There's oil in the burner if you want to turn it on."

"Would you mind?"

"Why should I?"

In the basement, she discovered nearly a hundred gallons of fuel oil in the burner. As she lit the pilot, she realized with something like shock that she was relieved to be away from her sister. After less than five minutes together, she was more uneasy than ever. They were such strangers to each other. It was hard to believe they were relatives; hard to believe that all this time she had been singing Heather's songs, expressing her sister's emotions, when she didn't even know her. The sister she knew from those songs was not someone she really wanted to know, for the lyrics were oppressively somber, morbid, steeped in darkness and decay.

Their relationship had only lasted this long, she supposed, because of the distance she kept between them. She had profited from Heather's genius without troubling herself over the other, inexplicable parts of her character.

Maybe she'd be wise to keep the distance even in Spencer. Rents here were ridiculously cheap. She'd have to pick carefully, though, if she took a place of her own. It wasn't easy to be inconspicuous when she was the one town daughter who had made it big — even if, by industry standards, she wasn't really all that big. Spencer would never let her go back to being plain Holly Andrews, sister of that weird albino Heather.

By the time she climbed back upstairs she had all but made up her mind to find a motel. The problem was finding a way of breaking the news to Heather. Her sister sat at the table with her hands wrapped around her mug, looking up at Holly through the steam with frightened eyes.

"What is it, Heather? What's the emergency?"

"It's something I have to tell you. I had to do it in person."

Holly sat down. "So tell me."

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"I . . . you won't be seeing my songs anymore."

"You mean you've stopped writing?"

"No. Yes."

Holly scalded her mouth on the coffee, trying not to get too far ahead of Heather, trying not to read anything into the words — though everything she said was haunted with implications of other things she didn't dare put into words. Conversations with Heather were like a game of riddles. Her plainest speech could be as cryptic and mysterious as her songs.

Go slow, she told herself. "Yes or no, Heather? Are you blocked? It happens, you know."

"No, it goes deeper than that. I hear them all the time. They've been coming more than ever lately. But I won't write them down, and I won't have you putting them to music and blasting them all over the world. It's bad enough that I can hear them."

"You probably didn't hear, dear, but the band broke up two weeks ago. There's no one to blast your words or my music, even if you did keep writing."

Heather looked unconvinced. "You'll get another band. Everything comes easy to you. But you won't have my words anymore."

"Why make such a big issue out of your words, Heather? I mean, they're wonderful, but they're not state secrets. If you don't want to write for me anymore, that's fine, but tell me so straight out. Don't cloak it in mysterious bullshit."

"Who else knows about me?"

"What do you mean? Who knows we're sisters?"

"No, who knows I write your lyrics?"

Holly met Heather's eyes as steadily as she could. "You know I promised not to tell."

"But have you?"

"Of course not!"

"No one wonders why you split your money with me?"

"That's my business. They think you're an invalid, and I'm supporting you. I mean, it's sort of true, except that you're earning your split. You really are an invalid, the way you live."

"I wish I'd *never* gone out." She gnawed her thin lip. "Did my telegram worry you?"

"I was coming home anyway. Of course it worried me!"

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"I wanted you back here, but you shouldn't worry."

"Oh no? My source is cut off. Not that it matters, since my career will probably dry up like your inspiration."

"I still have my inspiration. More than enough. You — you could have it yourself, though, if you could get away with it."

"What are you talking about? I'm a miserable poet. Where am I going to find anyone who writes like you? You're the 'Terror' half of Holly Terror."

"You can have the words if you want them. You already have the music."

And Heather stared at her, smirking, with panic a slow surging tide behind her eyes, playing through the steadier current of irony.

This was the same old game of taunts and riddles. She was supposed to play along, dredging for meaning in her sister's deliberately vague remarks, never sure of the truth of anything, never arriving at a final understanding. Heather's way with words made for powerful poetry, but as conversation it was maddening.

Holly shoved back from the table. "I can't take this shit right now, all right? I've been through too much in the last few weeks as it is, everything rearranging itself around me. I've lost everything I thought I could count on — and now this, my ace in the hole. You can't just throw this news at me and expect me to play your fucking little guessing games."

Heather gazed at her cup, looking slightly chastened. "Do you feel betrayed?"

"If I did, it wouldn't be for the reason you think."

"Because I — I did betray you, Holly. That's part of what we have to talk about."

"We have to talk sense if we talk at all. You're free to do what you want with your songs, but I think I deserve some straight talk when it affects me this much. I don't have much patience for bullshit right now."

She rose from the table and saw Heather's veneer of self-control slide away. Of course, it had only been thinly pulled over a bottomless pit of insecurity. "Where are you going?"

"To a motel."

"Don't! Stay here."

"Until you're ready to talk, things can only get worse. I'll call you with a number."

She walked out of the kitchen, simultaneously relieved and ashamed of herself. It had been so easy to get free of Heather, forcing an overreaction for

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the sake of winning some breathing room. It was all a pretext for escape. But Heather apparently believed she was as upset as she pretended.

When she came down with her bags, Heather stood in the doorway. "Don't go."

Holly allowed herself to soften. "I don't need more confusion right now, that's all. Maybe when my head's clear I'll be able to understand you better. We both need time to think about things, O.K.? I'll call you."

"But . . . but what if I need you here?"

"You don't, Heather. You never did. I've been the one dependent on you, it was never the other way around."

Heather had no answer to that, not even a mystification.

As she walked out to the car, Holly thought she heard voices above the hiss of rain. She looked back and saw the house being swallowed up in trees. The sound was soft and metallic, hardly human, the sort of noise the brain always reads into random patterns such as the white-noise sizzle of rain. Heather turned abruptly back into the hall, slamming the door behind her, and the sounds died instantly.

Holly stared at the house. The front windows were exactly as dark as the shadows under the trees. It looked as if the house were a facade with no rear wall, opening directly into the woods. She stared at it a long time, getting soaked, thinking she could still hear those silvery voices sliding away into distance. Then she remembered that she wasn't waiting for anyone but herself. She was free to go.

SHE WASN'T surprised that once away from the house and her sister, she soon felt much better. The Spencer weather, as ever in tune with her mood, had itself begun to clear by late afternoon. On long-ago midwinter days during the Christmas holidays, she and a few friends would drop acid to roam the streets and haunt the cemeteries, to explore the banks of the river where rapists were said to hide; and as soon as the drugs dissolved on their tongues, after weeks of gray-flannel skies and steady drizzle, the clouds would scatter, the sun would come out, and by early afternoon the grass was dry enough to lie on in a warm December wind.

She hadn't touched acid in over five years, but the sharp blue sky edged with clouds brought back memories nearly as strong as the drugs. With her bags in a motel room and a car at her disposal, she felt exuber-

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ant, liberated, as if it might be possible to live here without immediately being reclaimed by old unwelcome parts of her past.

That thought came with a surge of guilt. She picked up the phone and let it ring for several minutes. She was about to hang up when Heather answered, out of breath.

"Holly!"

"Who else? Look, I'm sorry —"

"Please come out here, please. I didn't mean to upset you. You . . . you have to stay with me."

"Heather, I told you I need time alone right now. I just called to give you my number, so write this down."

"But I thought you'd want the words. I want you to have them."

"Don't change your mind on my account."

"I haven't. I'm not. I mean, I want you to hear them the way I do. Write them down yourself."

"Are you crazy? You can't give them to me. That's your talent, your inspiration. Mine is music."

"But they both come from the same place."

"Heather . . . do you want the number or not? I'll hang up."

Heather's voice rose into a hysterical whine, and Holly couldn't control herself. She hung up on the words, "I'll take you there!"

Fuck her. She wasn't going to let this madness ruin her life.

A bitter joke to think that she had built her success around Heather's madness up until now. Many writers could fake the trappings of dread and a mood of gloomy posturing, but Heather had some sort of innate power of evoking dread with a few choice images. Something to do with her chemical imbalance. Their skills were suited to each other, that was certain; and that must be what Heather meant when she said they came from the same place. She had always found it easy to match Heather's words with the perfect sounds to deepen the spell of fear. She could hardly imagine meshing so well with anyone else. But perhaps it was time to try something totally different. She couldn't go on being what *Rolling Stone* had called "rock's first Edgar Allan Poe" forever. Even Poe had mastered a myriad of styles. The band had begun to complain that horror was stifling them, that their music was becoming progressively darker and drearier, and even the fans were starting to find it too oppressive. Almost everyone wanted her to lighten up. But she couldn't control the lyrics that came

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from Heather; nor could she explain that there was no way of "lightening up" her sister.

So this disruption, along with all the others, might end up being a blessing. It was unfortunate that the band had broken up just when they had finally begun to reach an audience beyond the loyal cult that had kept them alive this long. But instead of devoting herself to more of the same, she could try something new now, unhampered by public expectation.

She had returned to her roots; it was time to see if new shoots could spring from them.

She went walking in a vibrant purple dusk. Because most of the motels in Spencer were naturally clustered around the University, she inevitably found herself on campus, treading oak-lined paths mosaicked with leaf-prints. The air grew brisk and dark and the stars came out like distant reflections in a sheet of obsidian. The ivied buildings and chilly scent of pine, the students hurrying and laughing and holding one another, carried her mind away from recent trouble, toward older longings. The streets at the far edge of campus were lined with taverns; she wanted a hot drink, but didn't think she could handle the obnoxious crowds of frat boys that seemed to control every bar. She considered going back for her car and driving out to one of the taverns over in Laineville, Spencer's sister city, where the music was sometimes good and the crowds weren't quite so young. Or maybe she would save that trek for tomorrow night. She was starting to feel jet-lagged.

In the act of turning back, she noticed a sign outside a bar.

"I'll be damned," she whispered.

Inside, the music was just starting. She found a seat in a dark corner where she could watch the band without being seen. A man she didn't think she knew, though his face was mostly covered by his hair, sat at a synthesizer that seemed to have been custom-built by a very eccentric and impoverished engineer. The sound was good, though, and made her long for her own instrument, which was waiting for her in L.A. Ron Deal, looking surprisingly middle-aged, played bass with that particular lack of enthusiasm he had made all his own. Another stranger, a pretty, short-haired woman, played drums with enough energy to make up for Ron. And on acoustic guitar, his Strat on a stand in the shadows, was the man whose name had made her stop and damn herself in the street.

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Kelly Conklin played lead and sang, though the keyboard player and drummer threw in a few near-miss harmonies whenever it seemed the song absolutely couldn't do without. Otherwise, as usual, Kelly was trying to carry the whole band himself, and staggering under the weight. But it was the Kelly Conklin Band, and it seemed only fair that he should bear the burden.

She wondered how many bands he'd formed since she had broken up with him, and how long this group would hold together in its current incarnation. She watched Kelly and thought idly about a lot of things, which was a bad sign considering that the music should have caught her up and carried her away from all that. The fact was, they weren't very good. It was a long-cherished opinion of hers that Kelly had committed himself to mediocrity; this firmly held belief had made it easier not to regret certain choices she had made herself. She supposed it was unfair to keep a choke hold on her opinions. Kelly must have gone through plenty of changes by now. He still looked much the same, though — his Coke-bottle lenses making his eyes bug out, his long sandy hair beginning to thin, giving him an inappropriately seedy look. What he was, was nerdy, but the nerd look had worn out now that he'd turned thirty. They were the same age, six months apart, born in opposite seasons. When they'd first gone together they'd used this to explain their complementary natures; and when everything was ending, it had provided a useful metaphor for their combativeness. She could look at him tonight without seeing that archenemy; she could even feel a little glad to see him. Gladder to see him than to hear him, in fact. The music was a real disappointment.

It seemed like a long time before they took a break. Kelly went out through a back door. She checked the urge to follow him, wondering if he still kept his old habits. Maybe he and the drummer were hooked up. No, the drummer was in a corner with her arm around another girl. Kelly reappeared, smiling shyly at the crowd, making the same old moves, sauntering past the bar to acquaint himself with any girl who might've engaged in eye-play during the set.

It was a matter of waiting to be noticed. Eye contact brought him drifting closer. The dark corner gave her a perhaps unfair advantage, so she leaned to bring her face into the glow of a candle in an amber ball. He was starting to speak, still smiling, when recognition made him mute.

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His whole body stiffened, shook, and then he came at her with a yell, his delight pleasing her more than she would have expected or admitted.

"Holly! My God, I don't believe it! What are you doing here? What the hell are you doing *here!*"

He wrapped his deceptively strong arms around her, but only briefly — disengaging before she had to struggle to free herself. That was new. He sat down across from her and shook his head, his eyes seeming to swim inside his lenses, grinning and laughing. "This is unbelievable!" Apparently for him, too, the old enmity had faded.

He ordered another Irish coffee for her and one for himself, and they launched into the kind of talk that always follows long periods of incommunication. The major events of their lives were treated first as trivialities, to be touched on in more depth later, if there was to be a later. The breakup of her band amazed him, despite the fact that he'd been in and out of a dozen groups himself in half as many years.

"But that's different," he said. "With so much money and so many people hanging on everything you do — I mean, who cares what goes on in a small town like this? A few college students? Man, I couldn't stand the pressure. A million people hearing about every little squabble."

She waved this off. "We weren't up to a million fans. Maybe next year we would have been."

"Still."

There was no way to explain some things to Kelly. If he'd wanted to learn them, he would have tried harder. When she left him here, he'd been putting more energy into digging himself a hole than he'd put into playing guitar. That hole ought to be pretty deep by now, with wall-to-wall carpet and a reinforced roof, cable TV and a sound system good enough to keep him happy through the long dead winters.

You're so fucking judgmental, she told herself. Snap out of it.

The other musicians were starting to regroup. There was a quickening among them when they realized who she was. The keyboardist, Neil, and Raelene the drummer came over and introduced themselves. Ron gave her a brief nod, as if he saw her every day. Kelly apologized for not introducing her earlier, "Especially since Neil worships you."

Neil blushed and looked at the candle.

"I hate to break up this tender reunion," Ron said, "but it's time we got back to work."

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Neil mumbled something in a choked voice, and Raelene jumped on it. "What a great idea!"

"Sure!" said Kelly, jumping up and taking her arm. "Come on, Holly, we know all your songs."

She pulled back. "What? I can't do that. You guys — I mean, Neil...."

"It was his idea," Kelly said.

Neil smiled out from under his hair. "Honored, really."

She hesitated. She had come out looking for something new, and this was too much like slipping backward into an old groove. Well, and so? Was that always bad? It was one thing when the past reclaimed you with a reek of mildew and a breath of damp earth, like a grave gaping to welcome you home. It was another thing when music was involved. Music wasn't static; it constantly evolved and changed. Besides, she missed playing. It had been weeks.

"Whatever you want to play," Kelly was saying as they pushed and pulled her along. "You sing lead. Come on, Holly, you'll shake up this place."

She found herself settling behind Neil's keyboard, which lacked several familiar landmarks while featuring a few she didn't recognize. She loved to experiment, though.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Kelly called, "we have a special guest tonight, straight from a performance for the crowned heads of Europe — and I do mean 'heads.' Some of you have already recognized her —"

And indeed, as she came into the light she saw startled looks out in the crowd, heard gasps, and someone went rushing out onto the street calling her name just as Kelly was saying it:

"Spencer's own, Holly Terror!"

She glanced at Raelene and whispered. "You know 'The Woods Are Dark'?"

Before Raelene could even nod, Ron began pulsing out the first notes of the piece, which began with a deep choked bass like the beat of a heart buried under six feet of wet mulch. He looked over at her with a smirk that was somehow affectionate, and then it was her turn, the wavering notes seeping out like the last heat ebbing from a corpse. The drums kicked in, sounding weary, funereal. Kelly began to scrape his pick over his strings, eliciting a sound like long nails scratching at splintered boards. This was one of her first songs, one of the first Heather had given

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her, and she realized suddenly that it was the first song she and Kelly had played together, the first which had really come together and taken on a life of its own. An old song, but it hadn't lost its power. She had forgotten this power until now, because it had so much to do with home, and with being buried here, her teenage fears that she might never claw her way free. They were Heather's words and images, Heather's emotions — but when Holly sang them she made them her own. She belted out the words triumphantly at first, because she had escaped after all, her fears had been proven false; but by the second verse an edge of awful awareness crept into her voice and the words seemed to mock her, because she was back again, wasn't she? It was *escape* that had proved illusory. The guitar seemed to laugh at her, tinnily, with Heather's voice. Heather rarely laughed, but this was a rare, rich, cruel joke. She was back on her home ground where the woods were dark and the ground was rotten with shallowly buried memories. She was playing in a band with her old lover in the same kind of bar she'd dreaded she would never outgrow, singing practically the first song she had ever sung. It was as if nothing at all had intervened, nothing had changed, and the music was only there to remind her of her ultimate failure. And she felt that Heather had known all this years ago, had planted the images in her repertoire as an emotional land mine she would stumble over years into the future, and finally be destroyed.

It was a relief when the song ended. She was wary of what might follow.

But first what followed was applause. The doors to the street were open wide, and the amps cranked up to spill their sounds out into the night. She could hear her name echoing out there in screams, as bodies pushed in to fill the bar beyond its legal limit. The little stage itself was getting so engulfed by bodies that Kelly had to move practically back to the drums. Several bar employees stationed themselves around the stage to shove people back.

It was with more than a touch of panic that she realized it was too late to stop. The night had shifted its course, and caught her up in something she couldn't hold back. She could almost see what was coming, as if she had lived all this before. Something was crawling over the horizon, a smothering shadow she couldn't avoid, something black and faceless and awful that pressed in like the crowd, that massed swarm of faces, to suck the life out of her.

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But she wouldn't let it have her. She could take control of a crowd; she was skilled at that. All she needed was control of herself, and something powerful to exorcise her fear.

There was one song that frightened her more than any other, one she rarely played though it was always requested. Maybe if she played it now, if she let herself go where that song always led, she would reach the end of all darkness, the bottom of the well, and afterward everything would seem light by comparison, all roads would lead uphill, out of oppression.

She caught her breath. The audience waited, tense and expectant, getting edgy as they wondered what was coming.

She glanced at Kelly and his eyes reassured her that she wasn't alone. Everything would be all right. This was just for tonight. Songs didn't exorcise or invoke anything unnatural; they were only songs, spun from human hearts and dreams. A good song was an encounter, like *jamais vu*, a recognition of a place one had never seen before.

She winked at Kelly then, and brightly named the song she could play a thousand times and still find in it something to fear: "How Black Was My Valley."

Runick heard Holly singing from the edge of campus. He knew instantly that this was no recording. He owned all her albums, every bootleg. When he saw the crowd up ahead of him, the excitement in the street, he broke into a run. The mob was packed tight around the entrance to a bar, but it couldn't hold him back. Her voice drew him in; he slipped through the crowd as if invisible, right up to the edge of the stage, and nearly stumbled out in front of her.

His heart nearly stopped. He had never been this close. But suddenly he felt naked, vulnerable, afraid that she might see him — though she was still singing, with eyes closed, the last verse of "The Woods Are Dark." He wondered how much he'd missed.

He'd attended all her Portland concerts with a bouquet of black roses. He was always among the first in line, the first to the edge of the stage, and there had always come a moment when he was able to reach up and hand the bouquet to her, imagining that something subtler passed between them when she met his eyes and nodded her thanks. He dreamed of all the things she had to say to him, dreamed she might decode all the secret messages locked up in her songs — as if they were all meant for

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him. But tonight, without his roses, thrust suddenly into this crowd, there was nothing to set him apart from all the others. He was close enough to see lines in her thin unsmiling face. She looked weary, and he wished he could comfort her. If only she knew him, knew his secret soul, he would give her *such* love. A single streak of pure white ran through her jet-black hair, making her look ancient and youthful at the same time. He longed to press his face against that hair, to inhale the scent of her, to caress her tenderly and protect her from all trouble. Looking at her was exquisite agony, almost unbearable, as if she were simultaneously mother, sister and lover. Chills ran through him like fever waves, spreading from his heart to his crotch and back again.

In the silence that ended "The Woods Are Dark," Runick glanced furtively at those around him, and was shocked to see that their eyes held something like the same adoration and passion that he felt. Nothing the equal of his own, of course, but still — a puny striving to unite with her power, her purity, as if they alone could make her whole, as if her energy were a physical substance they consumed like addicts. He despised the way they drained the life away from her — no wonder she looked tired. He would never treat her so badly; he wanted to give something to her, not steal it away. No one here could possibly understand her songs as thoroughly as Runick did, for no one here had such a sympathetic darkness at their core, a blackness that harmonized so completely to her music. The dark valley inside him had known no other light than Holly's voice. In that place especially, she sang for him alone, she created and celebrated his power.

Jealousy made him grit his teeth. His entire being clenched in fury and frustration. His eyes were fixed on her mouth, so he saw, rather than heard, her words: "How Black Was My Valley." He stiffened in surprise, almost backing away. This was a kind of blasphemy!

But it was too late to flee. The first notes were already sweeping him away, carrying all his rage and jealous passion down into the dark.

Maybe if he'd had some warning, if he'd had time to steel himself against the song, he could have made himself invulnerable. But he was so used to hearing it in private, giving himself to the music completely, that now his descent into the valley was a conditioned reflex — a cue planted and reinforced by self-hypnosis, irresistible.

The pressure of the crowd merged with the pressure of darkness. In-

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stead of cigarette smoke and spilled beer he smelled the night wind blowing through pines and moss. He was alone now, sweeping down into the valley, borne along by the cascading notes, unable to turn back or slow his descent.

He struggled against the current, dimly aware that there was danger here because his *other* body was in jeopardy. But resistance was useless. He couldn't tell if his eyes were open or closed, if he were dreaming or awake. All he knew was that the music was loud, all-enveloping, beating at his blood and bones, and its volume made the vision stronger than ever before. She had never played it in a concert he attended. The valley was deeper and darker, impossibly real. Tonight there were no prefatory stars or moon, not even a hint of blanketing clouds. Above was simple darkness, and the sense of sheer walls closing in as he plunged into the deep well of darkness.

The musical wind sucked him down toward the source of sound, so strong that he hardly needed his wings to soar.

Then suddenly there was light, a nova, and Holly's face shone out at him as her luminous words spilled their radiance over everything. He panicked, beating backward, afraid of the flash — afraid that his true nature would be revealed, his sickness exposed, and everyone would see what he really was. He fanned his black wings, trying to blot her out before she could harm him. He felt his shadow spreading, saw the fear come into her eyes as she finally noticed him and recognized his power —

"Runick!"

And again he was snatched back, his wings furling up painfully, the lights of the bar breaking in on the black purity of the vision, all his limitless power abruptly dwindling to nothing but the weak shell of a frantic, obsessed young man — only one among many.

It was Nevis again, his roommate, shouting. "I been looking for you, man! See you found her, though. Isn't this great? I told you she'd play for us!"

Runick tried to pull away, struggling back to the valley where his destiny lay, but he was hopelessly off the track. He stumbled away from the stage, unable to bear the disparity between the growing intensity of the song and his own loss of power. Nevis clutched his shoulder, shouting in his ear.

"After this we'll stake out her sister's place on the edge of town, O.K.?

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Heather Anderson's her name. Holly's probably staying there. We'll get her autograph or maybe a good look through the shades."

"You can't do that."

"Sure we can. Come on, you're her biggest fan, you should be up for it. When are you gonna get another chance like this?"

"You can't invade her privacy like that. You don't understand."

"It's not like we're breaking into her house, Runick, we just want to see her. But hey, if you don't want to come along, that's fine."

He couldn't imagine hiding with anyone else, tolerating their brutish comments. Their understanding of her songs was superficial; to them all rock music was just an excuse to jerk around and scream and do drugs. As if the Black Valley were only a valley, only words in a song, instead of a place more real to Runick than the inside of this bar. Nevis had never been to that place; he had no idea what made it so *black*.

Still . . . if he was clever, and went along with them only so far, he might profit from their enthusiasm — at least as far as it went. He didn't have to sink to their level when he could stand on their shoulders.

"Maybe I'll go," he said. "Just to keep you in line."

Nevis cheered and then he was gone, spotting another accomplice. Left alone in the crowd, Runick looked back at the stage, wishing things could be as they had been before. The image of the dark valley had frightened him, but at least it was better — more fulfilling — than this.

But he was grounded in reality now, mired in bodies. The rest of the concert was almost disappointing, with never another moment when he felt close to Holly until she hustled past him with the guitarist's arm over her shoulder, fighting for the door. For a brief moment he found himself inadvertently placed in her path. The panic in her eyes might not have been meant for him, but it looked like recognition.

AFTER PLAYING a set in that bar, it was ruined for the group as a place to relax. Ron took off without a word as soon as they got out the door. Kelly suggested a bar in Laineville, and Raelene immediately dropped out. When they got there, Holly could see why. It was full of cowboys, such as they were these days, and more kept coming in carrying bowling bags. She couldn't help but feel anonymous here. Neil asked endless technical questions about the equipment she used until Kelly started steering the conversation toward events from their past —

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things the synth player had no part in. Eventually Neil said something about having to get up early for work, and then they were alone. Later they walked down Main Street looking in dark storefront windows, wandering around a subject that didn't fit comfortably into any conversation. The end of the evening seemed all too inevitable. Worse, despite herself Holly found that she was curious about exactly how much — and how little — Kelly had changed. It had been a long time since she'd been in this position with anyone who'd known her first as Holly Andrews rather than Holly Terror.

"Time I got back," she said, and caught the expected flicker of anxiety in Kelly's eyes.

"You staying with Heather?"

"Motel. I can't take too much of her right now."

"No doubt."

"Have you seen her at all, Kelly? Is it just me, or is she weirder now?"

He shook his head. "I don't run into her very often — you know how she is."

"I feel bad not staying with her, but...."

"You two never did have much in common." He squeezed her hand. "Come on, I'll give you a lift. Maybe you want to come by my place for a while?"

"Maybe for a while," she answered, wondering whether it was curiosity or entropy that made her go against her better judgment.

Sometime late, or very early, in blackness except for a candle's last flickering, Kelly's phone rang. Holly woke just enough to feel grateful that it couldn't be for her. But then Kelly shook her, whispering, "Holly, it's for you. It's Heather."

"Heather?" She sat up and drew blankets around herself, unwilling to accept the phone. He had the mouthpiece covered. "What does she want?"

He shrugged bony shoulders. "I don't know — she sounds hysterical. She asked if I'd seen you."

"Fuck." She took the phone. "Heather? What is it? What's wrong?"

Heather could barely restrain herself. "They've come for you, Holly! They're out there! They think I'm you — they — please come over, Holly, please!"

"What are you talking about? Who's out where?"

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"In the trees, they've been coming closer all the time, but this is the first time . . . around the house. They think you're here and they'll come after me if they can't have you."

"Jesus, do you know what you sound like? Call the police if you have Peeping Toms."

"They're not — they'd just melt away. I wanted to explain but it took too long and you ran out before — please, Holly, you have to come!"

She pulled the phone away from her ear and sighed, shaking her head at Kelly.

"You want me to come with you?" he asked.

"I don't know if I'm going anywhere," she said.

Heather must have heard her: "You have to!" she screamed.

"I think you better," Kelly said. "Come on, I'll drive you."

"This better be good, Heather!" she yelled into the phone. She slammed it down.

Kelly was already dressed by the time she got out of bed. He shoved her clothes at her in a wad. "I'll start the car."

She dressed clumsily, anchored down by a cumulative exhaustion that wouldn't let her come completely awake. She needed a good twelve to sixteen hours of sleep. It was like a dream, standing here swaying over Kelly's bed, but that was a more reassuring dream than the thought of seeing Heather in this state.

Fifteen minutes later they rounded the curve before the old house, and the headlights of Kelly's car picked out a glint of chrome, a flash of a windshield. For a snapshot instant Holly saw a new-model pickup truck parked a few dozen yards down the road; in the cab, a young man was frozen on her eyes in the act of raising a bottle to his lips. As they passed the truck, the kid ducked out of sight. They turned into the driveway; the headlights flushed several figures from the trees near the house.

"Hey!" Kelly slammed on the brakes and jumped out to intercept them. They were boys, faces bright with liquor and laughter. Kelly didn't even get close to them; they hooted derisively and fled down the road. A moment later the pickup sped into view, made a dramatic, tire-screeching 180, and tore back toward town. The bed was crowded with passengers now, chanting into the night, their voices fading with distance: "Hol-ly! Ter-ror! Hol-ly! Ter-ror!"

"Fans of yours?" Kelly said.

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She turned toward the house, wondering why all the lights were off. Suddenly Heather emerged from the gloom of the doorway and ran across the grass to meet her, sobbing. She felt cold and damp as the lawn in Holly's arms.

"O.K., O.K., Heather, they were just kids."

"I thought — I thought —" But she was too shaken to speak.

Holly and Kelly led her back to the house, trying light switches as they went. None worked until they got into the kitchen. She sat Heather at the table while Kelly filled the kettle.

"You should've called the police," he said.

"That's what I told her," Holly said.

"No . . . I've called them before. They don't come out here anymore. Or if they do come, they just laugh at me."

"You mean this happens all the time?" Kelly asked.

"Not . . . not exactly."

"They're only bothering you because of me," Holly said. "Why should they be coming around all the time? They know I'm never here."

Heather shook her head so minutely that Holly almost missed the gesture. She read her sister's intent, though. She wouldn't speak further in front of Kelly.

Fortunately, he didn't seem anxious to stay. When they heard the first birds singing, he allowed himself to be led to the door. "You sure you're going to be all right?"

"She's my sister, Kel. I'll be fine just as soon as I get her in bed."

"Well, call me when you're up again, I'll pick you up and you can get your car. Maybe we can have dinner or something?"

"I'll call."

She watched him drive away. It was still pitch-black outside. The birds didn't make another sound.

Heather paced restlessly across the kitchen floor. "I couldn't talk with him around."

"I know. I know what you want to talk about."

"How could you?"

"Because I know what's on your mind. This whole 'emergency' of yours. You think somehow these kids know you write my songs, you believe I told somebody, and now they're coming around to wreck your privacy. Isn't that it? You think they're *your* fans."

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"No —"

"I didn't tell anybody about you, Heather. If you want to know why kids come around bothering you, it's because you've made yourself into some kind of institution around here — the weird white lady. You know, in the sort of house kids dare each other to visit on Halloween."

"It wasn't kids before tonight. If you'll listen, I'll try to make you understand."

Silence. Black night. The wall clock's ticking was unnaturally loud.

"Well?" she finally said.

Heather went to the window. Holly saw nothing in the glass but her sister's reflection, as in a black mirror.

"It'll be light soon. Safe to go. We're at the shallow end of night."

"The shallow.... What are you talking about?"

Heather moved toward the back door, gesturing for Holly to follow her. "It's easier to show you."

"You want to go outside?"

"Yes. You can see for yourself. You can decide what you want to do."

Holly couldn't find the strength to resist. The sooner this ended, the sooner she could drag herself up to her barren room and sleep. She followed Heather onto the back porch, which was dark and damp as the outdoors — and suddenly she *was* outdoors. Pine needles brushed her face, leaving a trail of cold tears. She glanced back and saw the bright kitchen windows far behind them, though she had no memory of stepping over the threshold.

Exhaustion was making her delirious.

There was just enough light to see the trunks of trees around her. Her shadow fell dead ahead, pointing the way from the house. Heather was a pale shape weaving through the pines. She sensed that the sky was growing light, and she could just make out the scratchy glitter of wet needles and the curved gleam of resinous branches heavy with rain. Their footsteps were padded, muffled, and made a crumpling sound, as if they were wading through tissue paper.

She looked up and saw Heather staring at her with a forlorn expression. She started toward her, then saw it wasn't Heather at all. Heather was far ahead, in another direction, moving quickly — though she stopped when she heard Holly's gasp. The other face she'd seen was gone now; as if it had never been.

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"What is it?" Heather asked, coming back to her.

"I thought I saw your face, but it wasn't you."

"No, it wasn't. Take my hand. Don't be afraid, it'll soon be light."

And if it weren't? Holly wondered. What then? What if this were the deep end of night?

To Runick, the house was a dark shrine, and the coming of the headlights could not have pried him loose from his place of worship. The others scurried like bugs, taking their sacrilegious comments with them. It was a relief to have the darkness to himself. He crouched low among the pines, finally rewarded for his vigil by the sight of her walking through the headlights. When they darkened a moment later, he blinked furiously and tried to track her through the night, but it was impossible. Then he heard a door shut, and the waiting began again.

He hardly felt the chill, or the rain that came and went. He dozed. What woke him was the sound of another engine starting. He saw the car pulling out of the yard. A figure appeared at the bright kitchen window, not Holly but the pale one — her sister. He feared for a moment that she had seen him, but she backed away slowly, no alarm in her gestures. Moments later he heard voices in the trees behind the house, and a gentle crunching sound exactly like that which preceded his descent into the dark valley . . . the popping and clicking of the slightly scratched album. But this time the sound was actual footfall. He slipped through the trees, following, until he saw their shapes ahead of him. The darkness was easing a bit, sloping into morning, which added to his anxiety. He needed darkness to face Holly, needed the strength and security it brought. He tried to will it into being, and then remembered where he was.

He was the guardian of this place. The darkness was nothing less than his wings. All he needed to do was spread them, let the black pinions unfold, and then the music would begin and they would all be swept down into that place, that furrow in his dreaming brain.

Runick shut his eyes to evoke the feeling of darkness. He imagined himself at the very mouth of the valley, about to start his descent. He was the needle sliding into the groove. He was darkness covering over all.

The trick was working, owing perhaps to all his practice, his discipline. It was a reflex shared by the night; a vision he had brought into the world. He could hear the music now, coming up from a deep cleft just

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ahead of him; and as the sisters descended into it, he swept along behind them on a black wind.

HEATHER MOVED quickly, surprisingly strong and surefooted in the dark woods; and with one arm she lent some strength to her sister, who kept stumbling. Holly just wanted to lie down.

"Where are you taking me? Please tell me something. I'm so tired."

"Don't you remember coming here?" Heather said.

"I almost never . . . I was afraid of the woods."

"That was later. You weren't when you were younger. The difference between us seemed much greater then. Now you're practically the older one. So well traveled, so worldly."

"You'll always be my older sister, Heather."

"Believe me, there are times I wish I weren't."

"When my fans come around?"

"Baby sister, I have fans of my own."

Heather edged them around a rhododendron black and huge as a shaggy beast, on a trail she could never have found on her own. On the far side of the huge bush, Heather hesitated. Something made a sound inside Holly's head, a single note that sounded stark and sinister against the general muzziness of her thoughts. It woke her slightly, though she hadn't realized she was falling asleep.

"Heather, do you hear music?" she asked.

"Music? No, Holly. I hear words. *You* hear music."

"What are you talking about?"

Heather raised a hand, indicating the land directly before them, and said, "Don't you remember?"

Just ahead was a deepening of darkness, and also of the earth. The ground fell away before their feet, a black incision with the sound of water somewhere down inside it. The sides were rock and mud and brambles, but already Heather was moving toward a trail of stepping-stones that might have been placed for this purpose. With one hand she helped Holly down, step-by-step, below the roots of the trees, away from the promise of the sky. It was dark again here, dark as midnight, the dawn negated. Her eyes dilated but there was little to see except the untrimmed, frightening forms of wildness, enormous shapes looming overhead like the shifting shadows of vast birds of prey. She remembered, dimly, a

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childhood nightmare; and the memory was one with the sensation of that very old dream. In her fatigue, it seemed she had never stopped dreaming it. It had been a dream of strange sounds in darkness, an eerie music that seemed to come simultaneously from far away and from deep within. And Heather had been part of the dream, just as she was part of this waking dream; Heather calling out strange words that seemed like part of the music, words that drew faces out of blackness and shadows and nothing, faces that were not faces at all despite the mouths, despite the fact that they came to look at Holly, thrusting as blindly as the roots of the old pines; and in the dream she had screamed and screamed to get away from them, screamed and twisted and writhed about trying to wake, calling for allies, for friends, for anyone who might hear — but there was nothing, no one came to rescue her, and the dream just went on and on as the music grew, and the blackness grew, until finally, much later, it all receded and she was awake, possibly. Though it seemed that the dream had never really ended, the darkness had never ebbed, she had just grown used to it.

They stumbled along through weeds and vines, slipping on slick stones. Mud sucked at her shoes. She sensed the walls growing steeper, or else she was shrinking, falling into the ravine. She cried out and grabbed at her sister, who jumped and let out a faint gasp at her touch.

"Heather, what is this place?"

Heather silenced her, listening to the darkness. "Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"Something following...."

Holly listened, but there was only the trickling gurgle of the cold stream. No morning birds. The sound of the water was faintly musical; it set off a corresponding harmony in her mind. She fought to silence it, but it seemed to spill out of her now, flooding the dark. She spoke to drown it out.

"I don't hear anything!" she cried. "Where are we going?"

"It's so dark," Heather whispered. "It shouldn't be this dark. I thought we would be safe."

"Then go back. Let's go back."

For a moment Heather seemed to consider this, but then they both heard it — a grating sound, rocks rattling, somewhere behind them. Heather instantly turned and fled, abandoning Holly. Ahead lay a greater darkness; Holly felt certain the valley grew deeper and narrower here. But

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she was afraid to remain here alone — and even more afraid of what might be following them.

She hurried after Heather, and suddenly the ground dropped away beneath her. Her feet slipped on mossy stones; she landed hard on her back, and went sliding down a wet chute, a waterfall. Her screams and Heather's were mingled, though she realized that she had shot far ahead of her sister, far deeper. When she landed, sprawled on a bank of what felt like rocks and moss and decayed wood, she heard Heather somewhere above her, calling down:

"Where are you, Holly?"

Holly moaned. "Down here."

At first she thought Heather answered, "All's well." Then she said it again, louder: "At the well?"

Well? Holly thought. What well?

Her legs were still in the water. Curiously, she kicked them, but couldn't find the bottom. At the base of the falls was a deep pool. The water felt strangely warm and stagnant. Suddenly afraid, she jerked her limbs out of it and scrambled backward till she came up against a wet wall of stone.

"Heather?" she called. "You've been here before. How do I get back up?"

"Don't worry about that. This must be where they wanted you."

"Who, Heather?"

"Don't you remember? This is where the songs come from. This is where the music began."

Holly crouched down in a ball, hoping to shelter in the crannies of the rock. The pool made an evil lapping sound caused by the constant sloshing of the falls. By some trick of exhaustion, her faltering senses, it seemed to splash in time to the music in her head. There were little echoes of more complicated tunes implied in every trickle, melodies she might have worked out eventually, given time.

"Do you remember, Holly? I brought you here a long time ago. It was a special day for both of us. I knew we'd have to come here again someday. And they've been calling — wanting you. I had to get you to come back. I didn't mean for it to happen now, this morning — but I guess they couldn't wait. It's been too long already."

Holly suddenly felt that it was critical that she not answer. A single sound would betray her position. She tried to stifle even the sounds in her

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head, the dark music, fearing that there might be something nearby that could hear even that.

Had she been here before, as Heather swore? She had no conscious memory of the place, though there was something like it in her thoughts — a place she'd thought her own nightmarish invention. No . . . in fact it was Heather's creation. Heather had planted the scene in her mind: this very place.

"How Black Was My Valley" she whispered.

And suddenly the music in her head died out completely. Silence filled the darkness, blotting out even the sound of the falls.

Silence, until Heather began to sing.

The words came irregularly at first, as if wrenched from her. Then Heather broke off to query her sister:

"Do you hear them, Holly? Words and music this time? They ought to allow it. You've served them so well. We both have."

She commenced singing again, her voice rough and quavering, picking out words. Holly realized with a chill what her sister was doing. She was not inventing the words, not making them up as she went along — she was transcribing them, seizing on the odd echoing patterns of sound that seemed to float through this place, rendering them in human speech though they were anything but human. They were emanations of rock and water, of the trees and the air; and it was not a healthy conjunction of elements that operated here. This pool lay at the bottom of some process she did not grasp; it was a receptacle for certain evils that trickled down from the world above, things that could not nourish the roots of trees, things the earth could not absorb. Listening to Heather, she began to perceive the untranslated meanings of the sounds, deeper than words. No wonder the songs had filled her with fear — they were pulled from this well of darkness, this catchall for the fallen and decayed. And no wonder that her music had suited the words so well, for it was woven of the same substance. She had heard it, long ago; it had never left her for a moment since the time Heather brought her here; this dark place had always been part of her, its sounds directly inspiring her music.

Yet she felt no sense of reunion, of coming home. There was no welcome, though she did sense a sort of recognition, a quickening in the dark around her.

"They could have taken us then, Holly," Heather called from above.

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"They let us have a good time, but I always knew they'd want us back. Well, you were too young to realize what the bargain was; you might not think it's fair, but really, you got the most out of it. Music runs so much deeper than words."

Holly shook herself, as if trying to throw off a thickening spell. "You're insane!" she called. "You're saying you . . . you sold your soul to write those songs?"

Heather laughed, and the last traces of warmth were sucked from Holly's body. The darkness seemed to thrust its faces at her, and something rattled on the shore of the deep pool.

"No, little sister," Heather called. "Not *my* soul."

Runick knew the way by heart, but he had never had to travel it encumbered by a body as clumsy as his own. Where previously he had always glided down cleanly on a wind of music's making, now he scrambled and stumbled, gouged by thorns, and was soon coated in slippery mire, his fingers webbed with the scum and algae that grew between the rocks. The valley had required the sacrifice of his invulnerability, but it was worth it. Perhaps in the act of submitting to the place, it would raise him to those black heights he had long ago been promised. He had no doubt that he was crawling still among the lobes of his dreaming brain; that he had found some part of the world that expressed what was deepest and truest in himself, where for the first time he truly belonged and needed no longer shut out the rest of creation. He was coming home to the bottom of the world, and as he advanced a muted, maddening music began to play around him, stirred up by the rattle of stones underfoot, the swirling of water around his ankles.

A voice sounded just ahead, an intruder on the dark fantasy, and suddenly he remembered that he was indeed not alone here. He had almost forgotten Holly Terror — that it was she who had brought him here in the first place, she who had introduced him to this portion of himself.

He advanced more cautiously now, forever suspicious of the tricks reality played. In his visions this moment had always been accompanied by a spark of light, but in the actual valley there was no light; he might as well have been born sightless for all the good his eyes did him now. He carefully gauged the location of the voice, decided that it lay just ahead of

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him, inevitably blocking his way.

Suddenly the voice broke into song, to match the music that curled around him, but it was an ill voice. If this were Holly, then the valley had robbed her of beauty; her voice was sick as death. It sounded as if she were dying, wasting her last bit of life on this awful moaning that hadn't quite found a form in words.

The reflex of the dream came back to him then. There was no light to pollute the perfect dark sanctity of this place, but the song was even worse than light. The sound drew something terrible out of him; it brought forth the strength of the guardian who had been born to protect the perfect peace and silence of the valley.

Reaching for the horrible shrieking noise, determined to put an end to it, he stumbled forward with all the power of darkness rising in his heart. He could feel his nails growing longer, sharper, his wings spreading wide. He was almost himself again.

They were the words to "How Black Was My Valley." Holly had sung them herself thousands of times, but never with such meaning, never to such a response. Her sister's voice seemed to whirl and echo around her, stirring life in the still pool. The pebbles shifted under her, as if the shore were being scooped away from underneath. The grating rocks made a chuckling sound.

She drew herself to her feet, scrabbling at the stone wall, trying not to let her teeth chatter. Numb fingers grasped a small knob of rock, her foot found a narrow ledge, and she dragged herself up several inches as the scraping sound grew louder beneath her. Water sprayed in her face as she moved straight into the flood. It poured over her head, filled her ears, deafening her for a moment. She pulled herself up another foot.

From far away, in a distant echoing chamber, she heard a scream. She shook the water from her ears, and it was suddenly nearer. Heather's voice became a harsh coughing, then nothing more than a rattle. She pressed close to the rock, waiting for the next sound, peering desperately upward through the spray.

Dimly, above her, she saw two shapes struggling. One was Heather; she knew the pale flag of hair that lashed the dark. But it seemed as if the other figure was the one that frantically whipped the flag. All she could see of it was its blackness, even darker than the rest of the valley; there

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was something bird- or batlike about it, a sense of huge wings spreading as the two figures coiled close together and sprang into flight above her.

They soared for only a moment, and then their plunge carried them past her. They hit the surface of the pool with a hollow sound, as if penetrating a drum. Water exploded over Holly, nearly sweeping her from the rock; in its aftermath she heard a rush of loose pebbles, as in an avalanche.

And then silence.

The music was gone from her head; her sister's song, as well as the source, were gone.

From the top of the slope, she looked back once and found that morning light had finally begun to penetrate the place. Below her — not nearly as far as she had imagined — was a deep still pool, a sheltered well. Water ran out through a narrow cleft in the far wall, a tumble of broken stone where the current became subterranean. Nothing but water could have passed through the crack.

She tried to tear herself away, to hurry for help, but the surface of the pool captured her eye, like a lens into another world. The pool looked

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bottomless. The falls continued to patter down upon it, agitating the smoothness only slightly; it shook with a steady rippling, crystalline, pure.

And then a face appeared just beneath the surface — not her sister, but a young man's face that might have been familiar if it hadn't looked so distorted by the liquid. His eyes were enormous, staring straight up at her, and filled inexplicably with adoration, blazing with love, as if in death she had brought him unspeakable fulfillment.

It was that which sent her running, back up the valley through the brightening day.

Later, after the police had tied up the obvious loose ends, after the pool had been plumbed and found bottomless, dredged and scoured by divers and yielded up nothing, after Holly Terror had fled Spencer vowing never to return, Runick's family came to gather his things. Nevis stayed out of the room for the hour it took to pack a few sad boxes; avoiding their eyes, he didn't speak of that night, or say anything more than he had told the police. He couldn't help feeling guilty, somehow responsible. Runick's parents didn't say one word to him; dour folks, even when their son had

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been alive, and no wonder he had sought escape wherever he could find it, but mainly in music and the adoration of a beautiful rock musician. He hadn't been the first.

When they were gone, Nevis went back into the room and found that they had stuffed the trash can full of tapes and records. Holly Terror, all of them.

Nevis liked her well enough, though not with Runick's passion — thank God for that. He had other interests. Still, he couldn't look at the covers without thinking of his roommate. Never quite a friend, but still — there had been something about him Nevis liked. He'd felt a strange affection. He couldn't help but think that Runick should be remembered in a way he would appreciate.

So Nevis rescued Runick's favorite album, the one he played several times a day and treated so reverently that there was scarcely a scratch upon it after a thousand playings. He didn't bother with headphones, because there was no one he might disturb. He shut the door, closed the curtains, turned up the volume, and let the needle fall.

. . . And he was walking in darkness. In pine woods.

In a dark place, a deep place.

Before the first note finished, he bolted upright, screaming, searching for the light switch though he hadn't turned it out, fighting his way back toward brightness and waking, though he hadn't remembered falling asleep. He shoved the needle screeching over the platter, yanked the album off the turntable and sent it crashing against the wall.

He could never listen to that cut again; could hardly stand to hear another Holly Terror song, no matter how much her style changed with her next band. He couldn't say exactly why, for he retained only a faint memory of what he'd seen in that moment when the music began. He had a faint, unwelcome memory of blazing eyes, a woman white and weeping, black sweeping wings, and Runick.

Runick had been there to turn him back, and he counted himself grateful for the warning.

She was Holly Terra now. She had a new band, she and Kelly. They sang of the earth and its mysteries, while avoiding outright horror; there was enough of that in her nightmares. She lost most of her original audience, who considered her too soft, and started to gather another which

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appreciated the subtler edge. She could look out from the stage and see the appreciation of a milder crowd, older, not so obsessive.

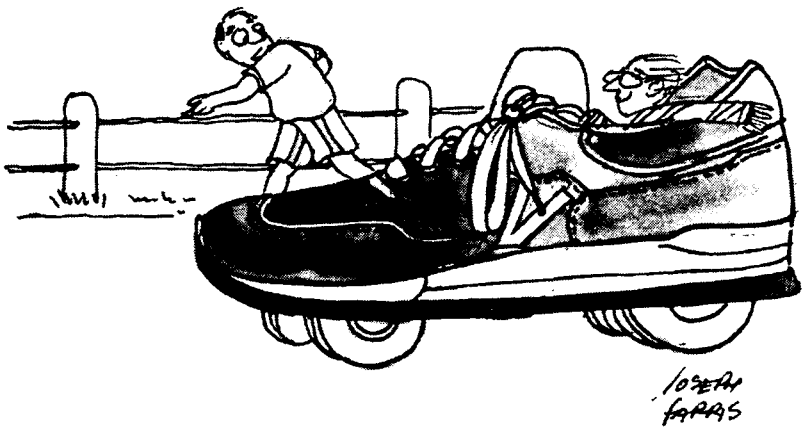
But sometimes, still, a younger face would surface there, eyes wide and drinking in every note, every word — thirsty for things she and Kelly had not put into these songs. Eyes like bottomless wells....

And then she would remember the black pool, and those other eyes. She would recoil and lose a beat, fearing to look into the crowd again for the rest of the concert. Before such eyes she always felt like prey.

The eyes in the pool had been gorged and satiated, at peace, but what it had taken to satisfy them had been beyond price.

She couldn't be sure of that, of course. Heather's life might have been the price exactly. Only Heather would have known that, having driven the initial bargain.

But Heather was gone now. And she had taken Holly Terror with her.



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Coming Attractions

IN JUNE, F&SF favorite **Robert Reed** makes an appearance with an off-world science fiction story called "Guest of Honor." Pico arrives home from her space travels to greet sixty-three people, people who made her their guest of honor, and all they ask in return is that she share her life with them — each and every detail of her life — from now on.

Popular new writer **Mary Rosenblum** contributes a gentle fantasy story to the issue. "Sanctuary" is about a young Ian, who makes his living by stealing fireplaces and trimwork from old abandoned houses. His boss refinishes them and sells them as antiques. When Ian breaks into one particular old house, however, he finds more than he bargained for.

Our cover story comes from new writer **Michaelene Pendleton.** "Rising Star" is about a dragon, unjustly accused of eating a virgin (since her first egg clutch, her tastes turned toward adult males — gamier, but much more filling), who gets blasted with a bolt of magickal dragonbane. She wakes up in a hot dry world filled only with cows. No humans. No gold. Until one crazy afternoon, when a man dripping in jewelry appears. A dragon's dream? Not really ...

In next few months, we'll continue our mix of science fiction, fantasy, horror and humor. **Jane Yolen** will make a return visit with a dark fantastic piece. **Allen Steele** will make his first appearance with a new spin on virtual reality. **Mike Conner** will open yet another door in the award-winning Guide Dog universe, and **Michael Cassutt** shows us the future of old age. Throw in **Grania Davis, Charles de Lint, Rob Chilson** and **Terry Bisson,** the future looks promising indeed.

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BIG-HEARTED DR. QUARK SHOWS THE DOG A BONE

WE'RE NOT VERY STRICT VEGETARIANS IF WE HAVE LAMB CHOPS EVERY SUNDAY.
SO WHAT— RAGS GETS TO EAT MOST OF IT.
LOOK AT THIS IN TODAY'S PAPER. THEY'VE DISCOVERED WHAT MAY BE THE FIERCEST DINOSAUR YET.
RAGS SEEMS TO THINK IT'S CUTE
YOU'RE SURE THEY'LL LET RAGS IN?
THE PAPER SAID SUNDAY IS 'PET DAY' AT THE MUSEUM.
I'M AMAZED THAT HE'S NOT AFRAID OF IT.
YOU CAN'T FOOL A DOG. LET'S TELL THE DIRECTOR HIS DINOSAUR IS A FAKE!
IMPOSSIBLE! IT WAS PUT TOGETHER MY MY BEST DINOSAUR PUT-TOGETHERERS.
THEN HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN THIS HORN? IT'S A LAMB CHOP.
QUARK, HEADS WILL ROLL— STARTING WITH THIS PIECE OF JUNK.
IT'S STALE— IT'S DRY... O.K., RAGS— TASTE IT.

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